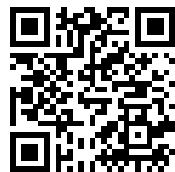
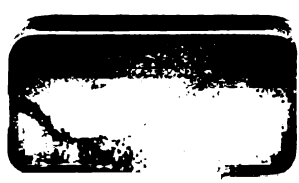

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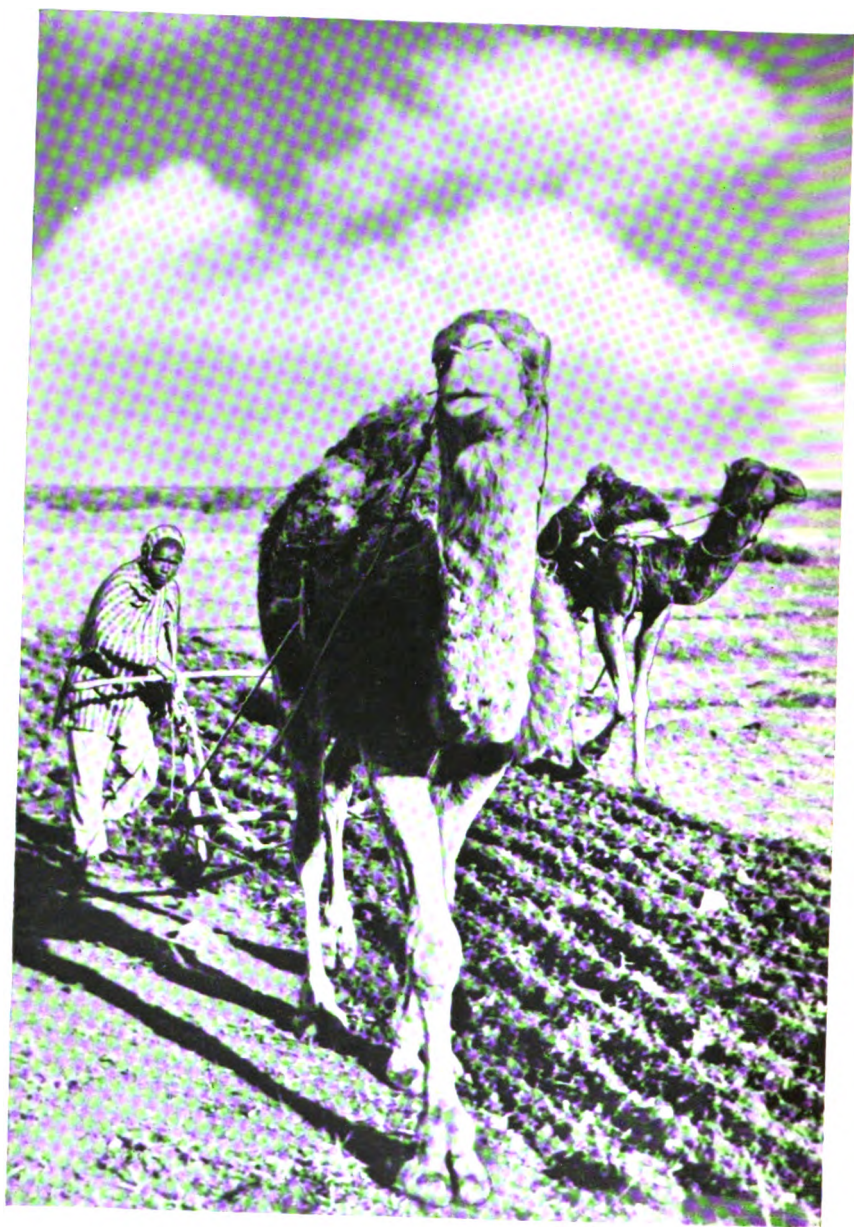


HELL RIDERS

AUTHOR OF, WITH EX-LEGIONNAIRE 1384:
ZILLAH, CHILD OF THE DESERT

COLLABORATOR, WITH EX-LEGIONNAIRE 1384:
HELL HOUNDS OF FRANCE
WITH THE SECRET SERVICE IN MOROCCO
THE SOULLESS LEGION

WITH CAPTAIN J. A. SINCLAIR:
AIRSHIPS IN PEACE AND WAR



THE UNCHANGING EAST

[Photo: The Associated Press]

Frontispiece]

HELL RIDERS/

AN ACCOUNT OF THE IRAK DESERT PATROL

AS TOLD TO
W. J. BLACKLEDGE
BY
PATROLMAN CRAVEN

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Names of persons, and in some cases those of places, in this chronicle of the Irak Desert Patrol have been changed for obvious reasons.

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HELL RIDERS

CHAPTER I

THREE RENEGADES JOIN DESERT POLICE

WE were trapped! Trapped like rats! We lay in the dust of the plains—three poor fools who thought they could escape from the Foreign Legion. We watched the approach of that band of Arab horsemen, whom we felt pretty sure were Partisans—the natives who police the desert for the French in search of escaping legionnaires.

There was a price on our heads. The Partisans received a hundred francs for every legionnaire they dragged back to that hell-on-earth.

And after five days of the most gruelling trek imaginable! We had force-marched over desert, broken a trail through dense palm groves, scrambled along boulder-strewn valleys, always under blistering heat and with little food beyond what we could pick up. We had lived on dates, tough sand grouse, roots, any sort of garbage that contained some little moisture. For two days we had chewed leather straps in feeble efforts to assuage a maddening thirst.

Now—sick, weary, exhausted, within reach of freedom, we lay awaiting these Arabs. True, we each carried a Mauser and still had a few rounds of ammunition. But it was useless to put up a fight. There was not a vestige of cover anywhere on that sanded waste. And the odds against us were at least ten to one. We

could do nothing, except lie there, panting with exhaustion, our tongues swollen and blackened with thirst, half-crazy with the torturing sun and the sand-grit in mouth, nostrils and eyes. We spoke rarely and then only in hoarse, cracked voices.

A sip of water would have saved us, even then! We had not started on this mad trek without knowing a great deal about each other's powers of endurance. We had served in the Legion for nearly four years—three and a half of which had been spent in devising means of escape!—and what we did not know about forced-marching, trekking without food, sheer brute sufferance, was hardly worth knowing.

Armstrong, for instance, tough, hard-bitten six-footer, who had spent twenty years wandering about the globe before he touched the Legion. I loved him as one fighting-man loves another, I, Digger Craven, who had known what it was to starve in the bush down under. His face was within a few inches of my own as we lay there. His eyes were red-rimmed. Rivulets of sweat and dust trickled down his jowl into the scrub of black beard.

I suppose I was in pretty much the same case. So, too, was Gyppo, our half-caste Egyptian pal—what the other half was, God knows! But he was a tough, under-sized little devil, wiry as they make 'em, and as cunning as he was wiry. We'd had his measure on more than one occasion. He'd go anywhere with "Amstring and Digger."

Five Days! That ghastly trek! And now this! After all our planning and scheming! Our project had been to get out of Syria and the Foreign Legion, by the northern boundary, make for Irak instead of

trekking south to Palestine—in which direction so many legionnaires had failed. Ramadi was our objective. After which, Baghdad would be easy.

And now! That moving cloud of dust resolved itself into a band of Arab horsemen, thirty or forty of them. Partisans moved about in packs of fifty, anyway, like the human jackals they were.

When they came within calling distance we had the shock of our lives. These were no Partisans! Arabs certainly, but not the dread jackals! I think we went a bit crazy then, just mad with relief, croaking at each other, rolling in the dust and slapping feebly, like demented niggers. We could deal with ordinary Arabs!

“What are they, Amstring?” gasped Gyppo.

Armstrong staggered to his feet, gave greetings to the leading horseman, and began to gabble in a lingo that neither Gyppo nor I could follow. In a minute he turned back to us, his sun-blackened face creased in a wide grin.

“These are police, too. They belong to the Irak Desert Patrols. . . .”

“God in heaven! That means. . . .”

“It means, Digger, that we’re already in Mesopotamia—on British territory!”

Gyppo squeaked—the sound was intended for a whoop! But it was the best he could achieve in his weakened state. For myself, I felt I could have sat down and wept for joy. There was a great deal of palaver between us, with Armstrong, our linguist, as interpreter.

These Arabs were a detachment of the famous Irak Desert Patrols, that little known organisation that

controls the police service in northern Arabia, chiefly over the vast area of desert and mystery valleys and hills which border the Baghdad-Aleppo road.

These patrols are composed of Wahabis—the bunch we met were all of that tribe—also Cossacks, Turcos, Levantines and a sprinkling of Europeans, including, we later learned, a goodly number of men who had found their way north from the Legion.

Their job was to keep the Baghdad-Aleppo road safe for travellers, tourists and men who were interested in oil and mineral exploitation in that part of the world. I knew little of them, then. I came to know a great deal before I was many days older.

That historic road across the top of Arabia has been the happy hunting-ground of the wildest cut-throats and marauders since the days when the Caliphs reigned. Kurds and Bedouins still descend from the hills to rob and plunder and kidnap. But we discovered the patrols had more than mere robbery to fight against. Even to-day the area is infested with dope-traffickers, gun-runners *and* traders in human flesh—mostly women and young girls.

At the moment, however, we were too busy swilling the water given us by the friendly Wahabis—these true Sons of the Prophet who owed allegiance to a Christian authority. We drank their *Ksara* (the native wine) and gulped down their *Arrack*, that fiery, potent spirit distilled from common dates.

And we were more drunk and delirious than good fighting-men should ever be. Parched and sun-cracked, filled then with water, wine and spirit, our bellies empty of the smallest particle of solid food, our condition was past praying for.

The Wahabis, learning that we sought British protection, readily gave us all they had. I can recall no single incident of that jog-trot to Ramadi from the moment we were lifted into the natives' saddles until we were handed over to the Commandant at the British headquarters. Whether it was a matter of hours or days I cannot tell. We slept the sleep of the drunk and exhausted, rich, restoring, blessed sleep.

Many moons later I opened my eyes and stared at a white-washed wall. It seemed that I stared for hours—until a familiar voice growled:

“Hey! Digger! How d’you feel?”

Slowly I turned my head, for it was as heavy as lead, and met the cold grey eyes of an unforgettable face.

“Gosh! Armstrong! Where’n hell are we?”

“In the British compound at Ramadi. And thank your lucky stars for that!”

It took some time to accept the fact. What is called chaos of mind was then my chief trouble. But there was no doubt about Armstrong’s jowl, anyway. As long as that was around we were not too badly off. Slowly the events of the past few days came back. I sat up in my trestle bed and stared about the room. Armstrong was smoking a cigarette. In the far corner Gyppo still snored.

“Smoke?”

“My God! I’ll say!”

We sat on the beds, saying nothing, content to smoke and think, especially think. What was there to say? We had passed out of Gehenna to this heaven of a cool, white-washed stone building, and the first decent bed in years. These moments are beyond words,

beyond any stumbling description of mine. Presently friend Gyppo sat up with a jerk and gazed wildly around.

"Amstring! Amstring!"

"Hello! Gyppo! What's biting you?"

The little waster rubbed his eyes good and hard and then took a long look-see at his adopted brothers. He grinned suddenly, recollection in his little black eyes.

"Gimme fag, somebody."

Silence for a space, while three happy men sucked at gaspers.

It was broken by the sound of footsteps along the corridor beyond the chick that covered the arched doorway. A red head thrust the matting aside. A red face grinned.

"Feel like some grub, you fellows?"

"You've said it, Ginger! Come right in!"

He did, carrying a bucket of coffee, dixie of rich-smelling stew and white bread—*white bread!* We brought down the praises of Allah on his red head. We hugged him like a brother. Food of such a richness was like manna from heaven. He stood there, his khaki shirt open at the neck, the sleeves rolled back to the armpits, splashed with grease, like his khaki shorts, his puttees and his great ammunition boots. Ginger was cookie and the loveliest sight we'd ever seen. Watching us, he was tickled to death.

"It fair does me 'eart good to see you chaps eat," said he.

"How's the enemy, Ginger?"

"It's eight ack emma, and you've been sleeping about thirty hours."

"Yes?" said Armstrong, incredibly.

After that we had a shower and general clean-up. We looked a bit more life-like when we paraded at ten before the Commandant, still in our Legion uniforms, of course. Colonel Ross-Coverdale, chief police wallah of that area, appeared quite pleased to see us. And it wasn't the Legion garb that tickled him, either. We learned he had seen lots of our sort before. No. He very soon intimated that he was in need of men of our type. He would assist us on our way to Baghdad, if that was really our intention. But he felt we should have a much more interesting time with one of the Irak Desert Patrols. We were men experienced in such conditions. Ideal for the job, were the words he used. The pay was good and the possibilities of an occasional scrap not too remote. He had nothing but admiration for men who could rough it. . . . He said a lot that doesn't really matter.

We found the prospect alluring. We soon learned to mix with the dozen or so different nationalities that composed the Fourteenth Irak Desert Patrol. The complicated patois reminded us of the Legion, except that our new pals—Wahabis, Cossacks and Europeans—were happy and carefree, rarely grouched about their job, and never carried around that air of suspicion and distrust and brutality so common among legionnaires.

Rocking on camels wasn't difficult. In fact, both Armstrong and Gyppo might have been born to those perilous seats. The *burnous* and *chaffeyah* (Arabian head-dress) were the trickiest part of the job, for all the patrols dressed as Arabs, nationality notwithstanding, and the fillet of camel-hair twisted round

out head-cloths required some practice for its proper adjustment.

Each patrol had its own commander, most of whom, we discovered were young Britishers with a taste for that sort of thing. They did not adopt the Arab clothing but wore the conventional khaki breeches and tunic, soft leggings and topee, and brown cravat.

Our own Skipper was known as Smith Sahib, even by the Europeans. He was a likeable youngster under thirty, hard as nails, tough as leather, with blue eyes and a boyish grin that were entirely deceptive. He welcomed us like a brother, glad to jaw to someone in English for a change.

No time was wasted in training, camel formations, the tricks of kneeling and rising swiftly. You just got down to it, or were left sadly behind.

The dawn of a particularly beautiful morning found the Fourteenth Patrol turning out of Ramadi with the fixed intention of finding and arresting the self-styled Amir of Kurdistan and his gang. Smith Sahib explained as our beasts loped and swayed through the dust.

I was as excited as the dickens. Even Armstrong's cold grey eyes were alight for once, though, as usual, he said little. We were sixty all told, which included the *oont-wallahs*, or camel men. Gyppo was as happy as a sandboy. The three of us rode with Smith Sahib at the head of the bunch.

"This Amir fellow has done considerable damage," said Smith Sahib. "He's wanted for robbing and brutally ill-treating a motorist party at a God-forsaken spot just beyond Tasa, on the Aleppo road. There were two women in the party, mere girls. He flogged one of them. . . ."

"Good God! Why?"

"Because she was white and beautiful—an infidel—and because it was his idea of amusement. It's three weeks ago. She is still in hospital. . . ."

"The swine!"

"Quite! I don't want you fellows to get the idea you're on a picnic in joining the Irak Desert Patrols. The work can be just as bloody as anything you've had in the Legion. Get that. This Amir wallah, for instance, has cut up two patrols already."

Smith Sahib's eyes flashed for an appreciable second. The boyish grin died.

"In the case of those other patrols . . . they both returned to headquarters without commander."

"Why?" asked Gyppo stupidly.

Smith Sahib gave him a pitying look. Gyppo could have bitten his tongue out after displaying such stupidity, I know, for he had seen men of the Legion mutilated by Jebel Druses, and apparently these Kurds of the north were of much the same kidney. Armstrong said as much. Smith Sahib nodded.

"These savages of the hills are the same. They love to exercise their Moslem faith. 'Christians are dogs, scum of the desert.' In the name of Allah they will indulge in the most bloodthirsty sort of sadism. They live for it. You've seen the Druses at work. These Kurds could teach 'em things. This Amir and his bunch are particularly ferocious swine. We've got to wipe them out. The job has been given to the Fourteenth."

And it was so. We camped on the outskirts of Tasa that night. It was arranged that Armstrong should go into the desert town, visit the bazaars, do

a little espionage, since he was an expert linguist. Gyppo and I went with him. It was then that we saw the wisdom of the "no shave" order in the Patrols.

In our *burnous* and beards we moved freely among brother Arabs, entered their dirty cafés, sipped *Arrack* and scented tea while Armstrong kept his ears cocked. No dialect got past him. He cautiously passed tit-bits to us. An interesting bit of work.

We were back in camp before midnight. An hour before dawn we had breasted the rise beyond Tasa, and with the first spread of colour in the sky were facing the loveliest valley—a riot of vegetation that was to prove our undoing. Smith Sahib rapped out an order and the patrol camels dropped to knee as if shot. Two Wahabi scouts went forward. Lying behind our beasts, we watched them lope cautiously along the valley.

Presently they halted, stood up in the saddles, sweeping with their natural long-sightedness the further deeps of the gulley. Suddenly one of them threw up his arms and toppled from the saddle into the dust. His camel dropped to knee. The other camel followed suit. Then the air was rent with yells. The infamous Amir and his band emerged into the road, firing from the hip as they came.

The next half-hour was as hectic as anything we'd ever experienced in the Legion. These devils were not to be driven from what they considered their legitimate pastimes without the most hellish struggle. It was as bloody an engagement as I've encountered in a somewhat eventful career. The yelling fanatics had no delusions as to who we were. No *burnous* ever deceived

them! Early in the skirmish Gyppo sat in the dust, spitting blood and mouthing the vilest oaths.

In that deafening racket one might have been excused for thinking that a whole battalion was in action. As I pressed the clips and sighted from behind my camel saddle, I chanced an eye in Armstrong's direction. He'd used his *chaffeyah* to bandage his jaw, but he was firing quite steadily—but where was Smith Sahib, who had been lying next to him? One couldn't start search parties in that hail of lead. But, suffering Pete, had they got Smith Sahib, just as they had got those two other commanders? There was something very uncanny, inhuman, about these wild men of the hills. . . .

It took us an hour to get them on the run. But we had no intention of pursuing them into the gulley they knew and which we did not. We retired, collected out dead and wounded, got the beasts into formation, discovered Smith Sahib still breathing. Gyppo, like Armstrong, had stopped one in the jaw. That's how most of us had got them, since only head and shoulders had shown above camel-packs. Anyway, we had vanquished the mob—for the time being.

A ragged remnant of the Fourteenth finally made its way back to Ramadi. Smith Sahib, bless his soul, passed out before we got there. Commandant Ross-Coverdale set about re-organising the patrol—in the most matter-of-fact manner. Apparently this was just an everyday sort of job.

When Armstrong came out of dock, with a new scar, he was appointed Skipper of the Fourteenth. This patrol was beginning to appear quite exciting!

CHAPTER II

HANGED IN THE SKIN OF A PIG!

A SUBTLE change came over Armstrong after his appointment to the command of the Fourteenth Irak Desert Patrol. Not that it affected his vanity at all. He was not that sort. A born fighter and a natural leader of men, he took the job in his stride. He never wasted words. And now, he did not appear to have any to waste. His jaw simply shut, and his cold grey eyes went down to freezing point. Life, the Great Artist, had done a lot of sketching on the canvas of his mind. He was beginning to look his thirty-nine years, especially with the newly-grown, stiff black beard.

His mind was occupied, of course, with the task of putting an end to the self-styled Amir of all Kurdistan and his murderous mob; and Gyppo and I, his tried friends, were content to leave it at that. It was much later in our existence of the Irak patrols that we learned the reason for his particularly cold-blooded ferocity towards the Amir bandit.

We had not long left our headquarters at Ramadi when Armstrong called a halt, kicked his camel to knee, and dismounted. The Wahabis were overjoyed to see him assume the *burnous* over his riding kit. They chuckled when he jammed a *chaffeyah* on his head, the folds nearly covering his face and making his nose seem more hooked than ever. Now he was like the rest of us—a pukka Arabian wallah! We proceeded.

"Listen, Digger," he turned to me, "I shall deal with this Amir wallah myself. We take his gang back to Ramadi in the ordinary way."

That was all. But it was enough. He never doubted whether he would capture the Amir. He was taking the patrol out to do it. It was nothing to him that the cut-throat bandit had already accounted for three patrols, *and* three commanders.

He said not another word throughout the whole of that blessed day. We loped on, hour after hour, in the blazing heat. The camel is a patient, untiring beast. We ate and drank as we sat, swaying to the incredibly long, velvet-footed strides, and no stranger could have said which were natives, which were Wahabis and which Europeans, in that conglomeration of men who formed the Fourteenth Irak Desert Patrol.

Gyppo and I had been in some queer corners with this tough old devil, Armstrong, but there was more to come, and we'd still a lot to learn about the lovable rascal's character. Deal with the sanguinary Amir himself indeed! Who'd be a soldier in the Foreign Legion when he might be tailing a Skipper like Armstrong! Gosh! This looked even more interesting than the famous Legion Suicide Club.

There was only one incident. It occurred during the unyielding heat of afternoon, as we approached Tekrad, a tiny walled village of the desert. A great hulking black brute was leading a girl by a rope along the white dust of the hot road. Armstrong stared for a second, then rapped out an order. Automatically the patrol circled, then closed in on the man and the girl.

The stranger was long and black and bony. He might have been an Arab of the Arabians, but he looked as

if he had originated in some Nubian hovel. A powerful-looking fellow. In striking contrast, the girl was half his size and white—at least she had a face of that curious alabaster pallor which proclaims the Armenian. Her uncovered hair was black as night, and so were her eyes.

Such a picture, the striking, high-breasted virgin and the black wallah of uncertain pedigree, was exactly the sort to intrigue a fellow like Armstrong. He poked at the coal-hued native with his rhino-hide crop and bit off a few pertinent queries.

The black one had bought the girl in the bazaar at Tekrad and he didn't see what it had to do with any stranger on a camel who happened along. He was taking her to his farm, and that was all there was to it.

Until the Skipper disillusioned him. No Eastern native has ever been able to understand the use of fists, much less that particular one on the point of the jaw which renders the recipient speechless and breathless. After which, Skipper Armstrong dumped the girl into the saddle, and instead of skirting Tasa as we had intended, we rode straight up to the town, where the girl was handed over to the local police wallah.

Slave-trading is by no means dead, but in that part of Arabia, God-forsaken and without even that thin veneer of civilisation to be observed further south, the dealings are mainly in women and girls of the beauty competition type.

Few white men knew the Arabian mind better than Armstrong. On most occasions he could get down to it and deal with an Arabian from the Arab viewpoint. This was not one of them. Dealing in women wasn't

in his code. It was a matter that could be handled only according to his early upbringing. He knew enough to realise that he had made an enemy for life with him of the black hide, but he was not likely to spend sleepless nights over that.

It was curious in a way. Personally, he had no time for women. That one in his saddle had got nearer to him than any I had ever known, and of course she was just baggage.

It was dusk by the time we had settled that little job. It did not suit the Skipper's plans to carry on through the night. We camped outside Tasa. Later in the evening I went with him for a stroll through Arab town. Gyppo started with us but very soon drifted away. Unlike his friend and Skipper, he had much time for women, and in that respect at all events he was somewhat colour-blind.

Tasa is much the same as other desert towns in northern Arabia, a laughable mixture of the dirty and the dignified. It has always seemed comic to me to note how a little cash and a silk *burnous* may dignify. You expect that sort of standard in Europe, but in this primitive spot it appeared pitifully farcical.

There was the usual concourse of vociferous natives thronging the bazaar quarter, a human menagerie that would beat any zoo, even for smells. A myriad lamps of the kerosene and wick-and-saucer variety lit up the garish scene. Merchants in their rickety booths cried in high raucous voices of their incomparable wares. Dirty urchins begged for *backsheesh*. Donkeys laden with packs of camel's thorn and dates tottered past, followed indifferently by big, brown men in loin clothes. There were veiled women and unveiled

bright-eyed witches—a jostling of Arabs, Jews, moon-faced Persians, tuberculous Eurasians, labouring Kurds, smiling Baghdadis, Algerians, Syrians and Levantines.

Into this pestiferous ant-heap we pushed our way. The Skipper had changed his boots for sandals, the better to achieve that cat-like tread so useful to all good Arabians.

“Fun, if we came across the Amir,” said he.

It had occurred to me.

“But how would you recognise him?”

“He has the triple fillet of camel-hair cord round his *haik*, like all big sheiks. But he has also an unmistakable scar between beard and eye.”

We threaded a way through hens and donkeys and pariah dogs and entered a café. The atmosphere was blue with smoke. The noise and stench was like every other Eastern café we’d tumbled into in various parts of the East. But there was something different about this café. I could feel it. A glance from Armstrong confirmed my impression. It wasn’t merely sinister. They are nearly all that.

We sat in a corner sipping *Ksara*, a native wine that is far too sour for my taste, though the Skipper could get away with quantities of it without turning a hair. And we watched without appearing to do so, listened without moving a facial muscle.

A native close by was expressing himself in no uncertain terms on the subjects of the French in Syria and the British in Irak. We rather agreed with him about Syria, but had some difficulty in restraining ourselves in respect to the other subject. Obviously this native was a learned man and a travelled one.

Suddenly the Skipper’s eyes narrowed to mere slits.

On the wall opposite was one of those bevelled mirrors with gaudily-painted flower sprays so common to these sinister dives. I saw the reflection of several people in the glass—men alone, men with women on their knees, men in groups busily choking the atmosphere with vile tobacco smoke. Nothing unusual in that.

Then, from my angle opposite the glass, I saw the woman advancing up the room, making straight for our table. I turned to face her. She sat down at our table next to Armstrong, smiled at him in the way these women have, whispered something, smiled again. I was completely ignored. So far as the black-eyed jezebel was concerned, I might not have existed at all. Which was not very flattering, even from that sort of dame!

Well, I thought, in the puzzled minutes that followed, she won't get much change out of the Skipper. She might push her lovely face into his with all the allure and charm she could muster, drape herself over his *burnous* in postures peculiar to her kind. . . . He was fool proof.

Then I caught his eye across the table—and guessed again.

"Go back to camp," he said to me in the plainest Arabic. "I shall follow you in less than half-an-hour."

I sat still for some stupefied seconds, wondering if I'd heard aright. Surely this couldn't be Armstrong—the man I'd known for years, the secretive, cold-eyed, fighting-man, the dare-devil adventurer, the uncompromising leader, the skilful strategist, the fellow who had always avoided women as he would the plague?

I went. It was an order. He may have been an old friend. He was also my commander. I went, and I

thought hard all the way. Of course, the idea was ludicrous. The Skipper couldn't possibly be indulging in any cheap love adventure. I had no delusions of that sort. I'd known the man too long. Well, there was nothing to do but hang around the camp and await his return. I talked to Gyppo. He was equally mystified.

His appearance was sudden, his orders swift, crisp, precise, bitten off in that characteristic way he had. The patrol must move off at once, leaving the camels behind in the care of our armed *oont-wallahs* with Gyppo in charge. We had a job to do on foot. If we moved quickly we should probably succeed, if we didn't, certain plans would miscarry and as likely as not we should be cut to bits or riddled with lead.

We moved off under cover of darkness, fifty-two heavily armed men, a score of nationalities made one by the voluminous *burnous*, as happy a bunch as you could find anywhere because of the scrap in the offing, in short, the Fourteenth Irak Desert Patrol on the war path!

It must have been midnight when we topped the rise that led to the Tasa Valley. There was no moon. The gulley was deathly still. Not even the cry of a jackal broke silence. There was no sound from the patrol, creeping forward like so many panthers, crouched, ready to spring.

"Got information that we are to be surrounded and wiped out, Digger. It's planned for an hour before dawn. There'd be the usual sticking of the sentries . . . and then a swoop. I reckon we can teach the Amir and his mob something about the art of sortie and ambush."



THE OONT-WALLAHS RESTING BY THE WAYSIDE

Photo : The Associated Press

And I had agreed. This looked like being the end of the infamous Amir. Armstrong and I were to turn the tables with a vengeance. Twenty-five of the toughest for each of us. And the neatest sort of ambushade to gladden the hearts of these bonny fighters of the Fourteenth Patrol.

We proceeded half-way down the gulley. I halted my twenty-five men, and the Skipper went forward with his detachment. We got down into the ditch by the roadside. A watery moon lit up the valley with fitful gleam and shadow. Crouching in the ditch, we could faintly discern the other half of the patrol. They halted at the bend and in a flash had disappeared into the road-ditch on our opposite flank. So far, so good!

Silence reigned over that eerie valley. There was no need for chatter, no necessity for orders. Every man knew exactly what was to happen and what he was to do. My bunch was composed mainly of Cossacks and Wahabis—the most reliable scouts and the fiercest fighters in the world. But the few Europeans that found themselves in the patrols were in much the same case. To a man, they were hardened warriors, swift on the draw, cool in action, ruthless maybe, making war without gloves, that it might end the sooner.

In three hours' waiting and watching, no man murmured. Then we heard the approach of the band of outlaws, saw them turn the bend in the road and pass the hidden detachment, watched them come forward to certain annihilation. They, too, were on foot, the better to steal around the camp where we were not! I confess to being thoroughly keyed up, knowing that my bunch were straining to go over the top of that

ditch, waiting breathlessly for the signal of my raised Mauser.

I put my foot on the crest of the ditch, twenty-five others followed simultaneously. On came the unsuspecting outlaws. When they were within a dozen yards of us the first volley crashed, renting the silence. Instantly the surprised bandits were thrown into confusion. We followed up our advantage, volley after volley shattering the disordered, yelling, infuriated mob.

They turned about, rushing for cover offered by the bend in the road. But they failed to reach it. Armstrong's detachment blocked their passage with a hail of lead. They were surrounded! Trapped! A number were laid out in the roadway. The onslaught had been so sudden, so totally unexpected, that they had had no chance to use their arms. A bunch of hands shot skywards. They accepted defeat. It was all over in a matter of minutes. Too easy. Like pinching sweets from a kid.

We sorted them out with lengths of rope, with a special halter for the Amir. Their passage back to our camp was decidedly rough. But the most exciting show of all was the execution of the Amir next morning.

Armstrong had said he would deal with the chief bandit himself. He did. The death of the self-styled Amir, who flogged defenceless women for his own amusement, was such as to be spoken of among his Moslem brethren with something like awe for years afterwards. I know that men still talk with bated breath of that sensational hanging of a Mahommedan brother.

Apart from the patrol and our prisoners, who formed a circle around the improvised gallows, a vast crowd of natives had turned out from the village to witness

the execution. As a demonstration of how to make the punishment fit the crime, it was the most illuminating example those folk had ever seen in their dirty lives. The Skipper had an amazing appreciation of the Arab mentality.

While the preparations were going forward. I stared round at the throng of expectant faces—and pulled up rather smartly. In front of the mob I picked out the faces of two women, standing there arm-in-arm. Armstrong saw my look and grinned. One of them was the young and lovely girl he had rescued from the black wallah the previous afternoon. The other was the siren who had sat at our table in the café.

"I can guess," said I, "that the older of those two, the lady of the café, is the one who gave you the information about the Amir. That's been pretty clear all along. But the other girl?"

"It happens, Digger, that the two are sisters."

"Geel! And she returned thanks for her sister by dropping you the hint about the Amir, huh?"

"Something like that. The luck of the game, Digger!"

"I'll say! But how'n hell did *she* know what the Amir's plans were?"

"Easy. She keeps a house of sorts. Liquor and so forth. One of the Amir's lads had got liquored-up there, and talked in his cups. He told her a funny story of what was to happen to the patrol camped outside the town. There was only one patrol, and a few hours earlier it had brought in her sister!"

Just then Gyppo appeared. He was carrying a huge, slimy skin. The skin was that of a pig with the feet still adhered thereto. Gyppo was grinning all over his

cunning countenance and his beady eyes were brilliant with excitement.

"Get a couple of boys to help you wrap it round the Amir," said Armstrong. "Not the Wahabi tribesmen, mind!"

"I get you, Skipper. Couldn't expect a Moslem to handle *this!*"

The skin was wrapped round the bound figure of the miserable Amir. There was horror, terror, loathing in his black eyes. He cried for mercy. He yelled to be saved from this final indignity before Allah. He was a Moslem. He was defiled by the touch of pig! Allah would not receive him if he died thus!

Armstrong's cold grey eyes closed to mere slits as he watched the screaming, struggling bandit being hoisted to the gallows post. A white girl had died in hospital because this outlaw had amused himself by flogging her.

"The Sahib is just," opined the Wahabis. "The punishment is meet."

Nevertheless they, true Sons of the Prophet, like the Moslems in the crowd around us, drew the *burnous* over their eyes that they might not see the barrel kicked away, and a Moslem hanged in the skin of a pig.

CHAPTER III

GUN-RUNNING GRUENER

IN a somewhat eventful life I have never come upon a more patient, more relentless lot of fellows than those of the patrols, but over this gun-running business even they had begun to get irritable and a little out of hand.

Every man Jack of us was a master of the hunt—for most of us had been hunted at one time or another, and I guess we were scoundrels enough to know most of the tricks. We were, in fact, living examples of the proverb—"Set a thief to catch a thief." Nevertheless, we had hunted in vain for a particularly troublesome gun-runner. We had hunted for the better part of a month—and there was never a sign!

We—who had a reputation for getting our man! Skipper Armstrong was restless, untiring, but impotent. Night after night he had penetrated into the holes and corners of Ana, the desert town on the upper reaches of the Euphrates, which we knew to be the centre of this illicit gun trading.

In his black camel's-hair *abba*, or robe, and his *chaffeyah*, our chief's disguise as an Arab of the Arabians was perfect. It was strengthened by his extraordinary skill in speaking the various dialects. . . . Day after day he rode at our head, scouting, searching, picking up information. Night after night he went on his mysterious expeditions. And the result was nil. He

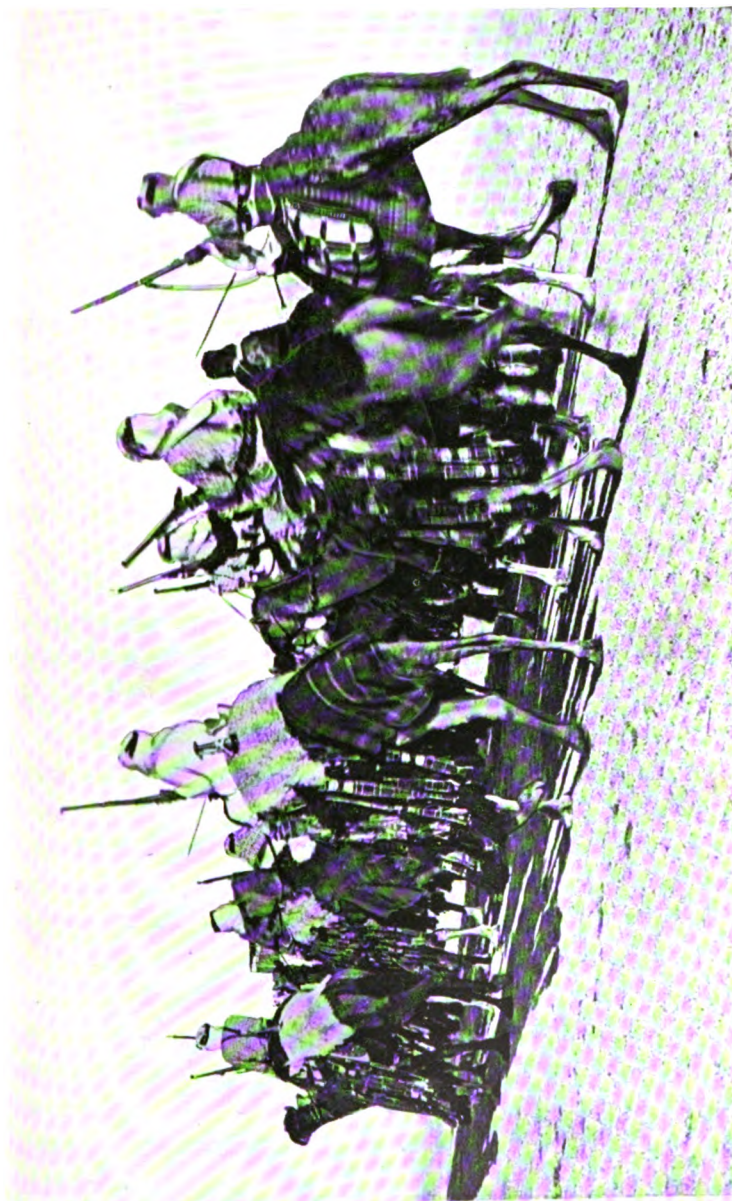
scarcely slept. The rest of us fumed. We were jealous of our reputation.

Idleness in a desert patrol is more than a curse. It's a disaster. Time, then, to break up the mob and start afresh. We were fed to the back teeth when the lashing tongue of the Skipper put us back to normal. We must have shown our state pretty badly one morning while trekking over a patch of country heavy with sandstones and boulders. It was bad going for the camels, and I think we were getting a bit indifferent as well—until the Skipper swung round and heaved a mouthful at us:

"Come on, you desert curs! You witless cripples! You children of bazaar thieves! You sons of noseless mothers and pariah dogs! Come on, swine herd! Is this a patrol or a band of dumb desert sheep? Are you men or sugar-eating tourists? *Marchez!* You crows and jackals! Gallop! You pig-house sweepers!"

And a great deal more in the same strain, his face cold and unemotional while he spat curses in Arabic, German, Russian, French and his own tongue. I guess it was just what we needed. It was like a cold douche. We jumped to it. There were no further complaints that day.

Even so, the first clue to the seat and centre of that gun-running came to us in the simplest manner imaginable. We had a new man with us on that trek, an American by the name of Bain. Another queer cuss. Quiet-spoken, unassuming, but as tough as the rest, if the marks of hardship and experience round his steely eyes were anything to judge by. A youngster with a beard like silk, with a manner as deceptive as it was dark. Another lad from the hated Foreign



[Photo : Fox Photos, Ltd.]

A PATROL ON THE MARCH

[Face page 24]

Legion, another soul who had felt the maw of French colonisation. It was he, by the sheerest accident, who put us on the right trail, and I was with him at the time.

We were strolling one evening through the more shady alleys of Ana when Bain pulled up suddenly and drew me into a doorway.

"What's on?"

"Say! That guy who's just passed us," quoth he. "Where'n hell have I seen his jowl before? There he is! The guy in the tarboosh and stovepipe cotton trousers. Sure! I've got him Kodaked! Kim on! Let's trail him, an' I'll talk as we go."

Wondering what it was all about, I went, footing it as cautiously as he of the black silky beard, as ready as he for any incident, episode, adventure, disturbance or scrap that would break the deadly monotony of that particular period.

"I've closed with that guy on two or three occasions. The first was early in 1920 when I was having my baptism of experience. I'd left home, way back in Dakota, a mere kid, to travel north of Mesipotamy with an American Mission. We were in Bakubah, a lil' spot on the Diala north of Baghdad, with fifty thousand refugees the British were looking after—the left-overs of a great war that nob'dy back home noo anything about, nor cared seemingly. . . . Waal, what of it? That guy's name was Gruener then, an' he didn't wear cotton trousers of the stovepipe pattern. He was a big noise, helping all he knew with the poor little refugees. Yeah! An' he was pinched for selling their ration issue to Arabs in the bazaar."

"Interesting feller, huh?"

"Sure, Digger. As slick as gun grease."

"Eh! And maybe he's a gun-runner. . . maybe!"

"Betcha sweet life he's around for the benefit o' Gruener an' nob'dy else. That guy's so crooked he c'd hide behind a corkscrew. I was on the spot when they had the pow-wow over him. A nasty piece of work, his record. Say, listen. The next time I let up with him was in Egypt, just before I found my way to Sidi-el-Lani and joined that crazy mob that rides mules in the God-forsaken Legion. Shall I forget it! Boy! He got a pukka sentence on that occasion—five years for robbery with violence. Why! I guess I've seen some soldiers, in the Legion an' out of it, but never anything as slimy as that . . ."

Bain's voice trailed off into silence. Gruener was turning into the bazaar. We watched him approach the booth of an antique dealer, an old Arab with a snow-white beard and a mahogany skin with enough creases in it as would hold ten days' rain. Nice pair! And what was this innocent-looking antique shop anyway? Had the old Arab got anything else in the way of armoury besides those brass-studded pistols and Crusader swords? I wondered.

"Would this Gruener recognise you, Bain?"

"Nope. Not in this clobber and the beard. Don't think he'd remember me, even without the chin mat. I was a mere spectator of his lil' affairs, and didn't come into 'em in any official capacity."

I left Bain on guard and got out of the bazaar and beyond the town walls like greased lightning. In ten minutes I was telling the tale to the Skipper, who was just on the point of leaving camp. In less than half-an-hour we had joined Bain. He was still watching the

antique shop, but Gruener and the Arab were nowhere in sight.

"They gone inside?"

"Yep. I guess they desired a lil' privacy for their confab."

"D'you think there's anything in it, Skipper?"

"It's worth trying, Digger. Get this, now. I'm the chief of a band anxious to buy a stock of guns and equipment. I'll do all the parleying. You two, being my lieutenants, will keep mum. Not a word, mind, but keep your eyes skinned. Got that? Come on!"

We followed in the wake of Armstrong, through a lane of rubbishy antiques to the interior of the shop. The Skipper yelled a greeting in Arabic and the old man suddenly appeared from a room at the back. The two chatted in low tones, gesturing, whispering. The old Arab began to smile, shaking his head, making a negative gesture with his gnarled old hands, even shrugging his shoulders—as who should say, "You've come to the wrong shop!"

But the Skipper persisted. The parley went on and on. I knew enough Arabic to realise that Armstrong was talking big money; and that brought a subtle change in the wrinkled old face of the antique dealer. At last the old fellow made a gesture towards the inner room. We followed him inside. Nothing there to arouse our suspicions—except Gruener, who was squatting on a mat playing with a mongrel puppy.

Gruener was thin almost to the point of emaciation, dark like a Spaniard. A mystery and probably a half-breed. He looked up as we entered, wondering no doubt what these three "Bedouins" could be done for. The old man explained, introduced the Skipper and his

requirements. We all sat native fashion and stared. It is the habit of Arabs to stare in silence on such occasions. The Skipper had had his say. The next move was Gruener's. He pondered a long time. I noticed that Bain had folded his *haik* thickly about his eyes. Evidently he was not taking any chances with Gruener.

The half-breed turned to Armstrong, asking him to repeat his offer. Apparently it was too good to be ignored. The Skipper explained that he had a band of sixty men, most of whom were true Sons of the Prophet who could not use the ordinary rifle, since those weapons had to be cleaned with grease from the pig and the Koran taught that pork was unclean. He had heard of the nickel-steel carbines that the Germans made, and which were said to work for a year without cleaning. He would buy a hundred such guns, together with ten thousand rounds of ammunition. He had searched long for that kind of weapon. It was the ideal one for men of the Moslem faith. Could his brothers help?

The upshot of it all was that Gruener promised to lead the Skipper and his men to a place beyond the mountain pass where such weapons could be bought in large quantities. After making arrangements for setting out at dawn next day, we hurried back to camp.

There Skipper Armstrong gathered the patrol together and outlined the scheme. He had some difficulty in restraining them. The whole bunch went wild with glee. After weeks of monotonous and purposeless trekking, we were to get busy at last. The Wahabis in particular were overjoyed. They prayed to Allah to bring the dawn quickly that they might set out on this new venture. From being a sullen, irritable mob,

we had now become a bunch of mettlesome, high-spirited toughs ready for anything.

A memorable dawn! I shall not soon forget the picture that the patrol made, riding out to the pass, a single file of camels with hooded and heavily-cloaked riders. The fellow who wrote "See Naples and die" hadn't seen a string of camels move along a ridge of sand at dawn, or he would have written "See a camel cavalcade at dawn and live!"

Sixty silent figures in voluminous burnous, moving without a sound, either from riders or velvet-footed beasts. But every man was keyed up to fighting pitch, thirsting for a scrap, and they were being led to the culmination of their desire by one Gruener! The Wahabis, in some respects like so many children, had spent the night in chuckling, humorous anticipation. Sleep had not worried them. They felt they had slept long enough, anyway.

I had no doubt, as I watched them file by me into the pass, that beneath the heavy folds of their cloaks hands itched for the knife-hilt, fingers played with gun-trigger. Fighting instincts were roused, but their composed features betrayed nothing. As for the European element, they were in much the same case. A deadly, ominous calm indeed!

We trekked through until past noon, over mountain ranges, sandy desert stretches, following a precipitous and rocky zig-zag trail until we came upon a camel track that led across a grassy plateau to the foot of the mountains; and there, nestling under a great pile of rock, was a picturesque castle fortress. It was like some great aerie in the mountain-side.

The gates stood wide open, permitting the patrol

to pass through in the wake of Gruener. In the courtyard were camels, mules and horses, in charge of a number of Kurds and Bedouins. We halted. At a word from the Skipper, the patrol wheeled into single rank under the wall and facing the terraced façade of the castle.

Armstrong had chosen Bain and myself, as well as two of the most powerful Wahabis, to accompany him as bodyguard, leaving Gyppo in charge of the patrol. We passed through a bunch of Arab retainers, who eyed us with curious but friendly glances. They recognised Gruener and gave him humble obeisance.

Following Gruener, we entered the *Mihmankhana*, or guest room, where we were introduced to the chieftain of this secret stronghold.

"The peace of Allah be with you!" said he.

"And with thou be the Mighty Allah's peace," answered Armstrong.

The Skipper's eyes, I noticed, had narrowed suddenly. Had he run up against this Sheik before? It seemed to me that things might happen suddenly. We did not prolong the chatter. We wanted to see those dungeons below, to get a glimpse of the armoury that lay underneath this pile of rock.

And a veritable armoury it was! There were enough weapons and ammunition there to equip a battalion—ancient and modern, Enfields, Springfields, Lee-Metfords, French Lebel's and "Germausers," the nickel steel carbines of which Armstrong had spoken to the old timer in the bazaar at Ana. The Skipper made a liberal selection. In fact, he very nearly emptied the cellars of the more modern pieces, ammunition as well. The Sheik's men laboriously carried the stuff into the

courtyard. A smart move on the part of Armstrong, since it saved his own patrol a great deal of trouble later!

All this time I was wondering how he would let the cat out. But that bit of satisfaction was taken from his hands, suddenly and unexpectedly. A great towering Nubian ran forward, bursting in among us as we stood there in the courtyard playing this thrilling game of make-believe, and freed the feline with a vengeance! It was the same Nubian whom Armstrong had felled with a single blow on that occasion when he had rescued the Armenian girl.

The Skipper laughed as he heard himself denounced by the excited native. The situation looked decidedly ugly. As he hearkened to the tale, the Sheik's face was a perfect study in changing expression—incredibility being the chief feature. His followers crowded about us menacingly. Gruener gave a yell and lifted his pistol. He promptly received a blow on the wrist from Bain, which put him out of action forthwith.

"You're not safe with a rod," growled the American.

Then the Sheik woke up and yelled an order to his men. Another second and we were in the prettiest rough-house one could wish. A bunch of natives came for a close-up and we received them with fists, and while we struck about just for the fun of getting our limbs loosened, shots began to rent the air. Gypso and his patrol were firing into the air as a signal that they were waiting for the Skipper's command to attack. They dared not fire at the mob surrounding us, and for a few minutes it looked as if we should fare badly.

Nevertheless, we thoroughly enjoyed the little skirmish, in spite of the knives that seemed to be flying through

the air in all directions. I guess Armstrong wasn't wanting the help of his boys. For the moment he was having too good a time with the Sheik—until there came the familiar rat-tat-tat, tat-tat, tat-tat of a machine-gun. Gyppo was spraying the ground at our very feet. . . .

At all events, it sobered the mob around us. Natives with broken jaws appeared to be lying about in heaps. Armstrong had the Sheik tied up with his own girdle. It was a lovely sight. The patrol closed in. Not a man was permitted past the legs of their camels. Neat. That wiry little devil, Gyppo, could always be relied upon. I believe he'd go to hell for "Amstring."

"Now, we've got to move quickly," snapped the Skipper. "We've two hours before sunset, and we must have this mob tied up before then."

A bunch of the Wahabis went into the castle to ferret out the rest of the Sheik's men who had attempted to hide until we should be gone.

Getting the remainder of the guns and ammunition from below, stowing it in the camel-packs, and tying the prisoners to our beasts, kept us going for the better part of an hour. And what a mob it was! I have seldom seen such a wretched, disreputable-looking bunch! A number had been brought up from the dungeons, chained prisoners of the Sheik, mere skin and bone wrapped in filthy rags, blinking stupidly at the unaccustomed daylight. God knows how long they had been starving down there. They were glad enough to be prisoners of the patrol, anyway.

In the Foreign Legion you march or die. Since the patrols cannot carry Black Marias everywhere they go,

their prisoners must either trot with the camels or die. But before we started off on our night-trek to Ramadi, our headquarters, there was, it seemed, a little diversion due to us.

It came from the Skipper and his prisoner Sheik. That chieftain was pretty much the same as another. He wore the *burnous*, the *haik*, and an embroidered knife girdle. In appearance, quite an ordinary specimen until the Skipper, standing him up in front of the whole crowd, began to address him in plain straightforward English.

"When you gave me the Peace of Allah," said Armstrong, "your salaam was more like the slick Legion salute than a pukka Arabian greeting!"

We stared. Skipper Armstrong hadn't made a study of Arabian etiquette for nothing.

"What's more," he went on, "a pukka Sheik never permits a guest to enter his *Mihmankhana* with his sandals on. I did that with the intention of making trouble at the start. You didn't notice. A pukka Arabian with pale-blue eyes is so rare a phenomenon that I would question it on sight. I did. That led me to your beard, which, though genuine and undoubtedly grown on your face, is dyed. Nothing in that. Sheiks often dye their beards, but usually a bright colour in accordance with racial and religious customs. You should keep your *haik* properly adjusted, otherwise you're apt to give your head away. . . . How long since you left the Legion?"

"Go to hell!"

"Quite. For a chieftain of northern Arabia, you have a remarkable command of English. I can understand any man slipping the Legion, having a fellow feeling

wondrous kind; but why associate with a noisome insect like gun-running Gruener?"

"Cut the cackle, for Gawd's sake!"

"Not before I've given you a bit of advice. When you come out of jail, join us! There are no blood-thirsty sergeants and no floggings in our mob. You're a man after my own heart. Besides, this you can't deny, you'd get all the fun you want in the Irak Desert Patrols."

"*Marchez au trot!*" bawled the Skipper.

CHAPTER IV

DOPE CULTURE IN BAGHDAD

A MAN with the inside of his mouth as black as the pit is not by any means a common sight, even in the Near East. Indeed, he is a very rare bird. That was why I sat up and took notice when I came upon one such individual in a coffee-house in Baghdad.

That sort of jet-black mouth means only one thing—dope. Not just dope in the pocket, but dope in process of cultivation. The man's presence in this coffee-house clearly indicated that not very far away the cocaine plant was being cultivated and that he was one of the cultivators who attended to the shrubs.

"Gyppo," quoth I, "we're on a job."

Gyppo grinned.

"Thought we were on holiday, Digger. Please to explain."

Our presence in Baghdad, by the way, was due to the fact that we had transferred a number of prisoners from Ramadi. Though the area of our activities included the whole of the country bordering the Baghdad-Aleppo Road, it was not often we entered the ancient capital. When we did it was something in the nature of a holiday.

Gyppo and I had been cruising round the wonderful city, and I, at any rate, marvelling at the beauty of its forest of domes and minarets, its queer little alleys and by-lanes, its streets, its conglomeration of grand and

mean architecture. Once again I had been impressed by that wicked scar which the Turks slashed across the face of this strange city—New Street. It was as if some stupid fool had struck crosswise at an elaborate wedding cake, making a crushed path through its architectural beauty of towers and pinnacles and turrets and minarets.

Johnny Turk has much devastation to his discredit, but when he put that ugly scar across the oldest city in the world, he created a monument to remind him of his wanted spoliation for long centuries to come.

New Street is now the main thoroughfare in Baghdad, like Princes Street, Edinburgh, Lord Street, Liverpool, or the Strand; but it was not built in the same way, nor did it just grow. It was cut by Turkish cannon from North Gate to South, since the original tortuous streets would not permit of a quick enough transit for the Ottoman Army. Once-fine buildings now bear the scars.

Gyppo and I had turned off this strange thoroughfare, with its multicoloured throng, into a coffee-house to escape the intense heat then blazing down upon the city.

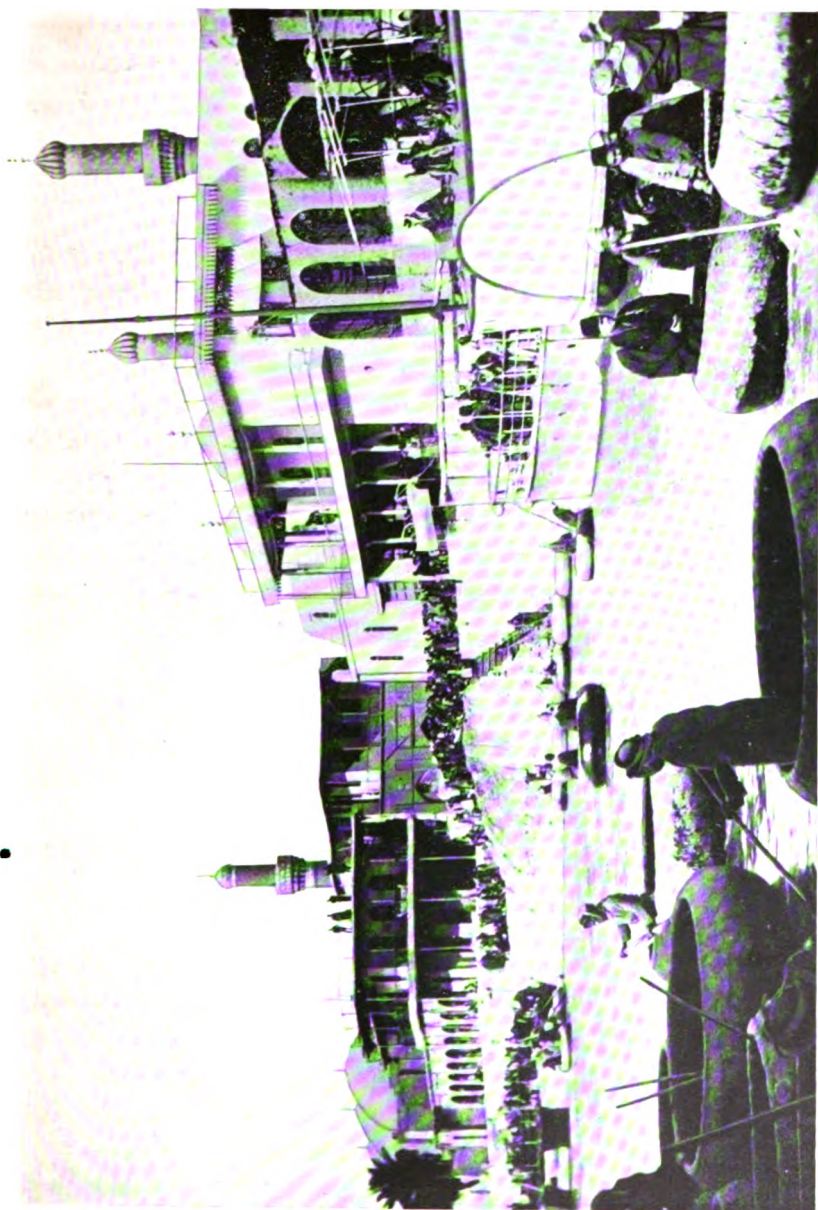
I pointed to a miserable-looking native seated alone in a corner of the café.

"Dope," said I.

Gyppo shrugged his lean shoulders. Had he not lived most of his adventurous life in the most dope-ridden country in the world—Egypt? What of it?

"The cocaine plant is being grown not far from here, and that miserable wallah with the inky mouth has either worked or is working on the patch."

"Interesting, Digger. How d'you know?"



THE TIGRIS AT BAGHDAD

In the foreground are a number of gufars, probably the oldest type of vessel in the world—reed baskets with wooden supports, plastered over with pitch from the bitumen wells of Hit.

[Photo : Central Press Photos, Ltd.]

"I've seen Indians in Peru with mouths like that poor devil's. Know how they get that way? They get the habit of chewing the leaves of the cocaine plant while tending the shrubs. The habit gives 'em a fictitious strength. Chewing these leaves makes them feel good—a sort of mild intoxication. The mouths of such men eventually turn jet black, and they themselves become victims of the plants they cultivate. They can no more stop chewing than the addict of the powder can stop sniffing."

"I get you, Digger. The big idea is to find out where this fellow works?"

"Said it in one, Gyppo. Now, you cut back to the Skipper and tell him what we've found. When this cocaine wallah goes home, I shall dog him."

Gyppo scuttled off and it was not long before he of the black cavity prepared to do the same. I followed him. I did not know my Baghdad—no one but a native could find his way around those twisting lanes—but taking chances is all in the game, and this was a bit of espionage work that I rather fancied. I should have achieved a lot if I found an illicit cocaine patch in the vicinity of Baghdad.

The sun was setting as we started off. It was not long before I found myself creeping as near as I cared to my quarry, in order to keep him in sight in the semi-blackness of those grimy and sinister alleys. And then—crash! A sudden, sickening sensation in the back of my head and I went right out. . . .

When I awoke I was in bed. It was a nice bed, a very comfortable bed, much better than anything I was accustomed to in the camp or barracks of the Irak Desert Patrols. The sun was streaming in through

an aperture high up in the stone wall. The room was beautifully clean, though sparsely furnished. By my bed was a black octagonal table, and on it—ye gods!—a bottle of spirits, a bowl of ice and glasses.

I raised myself gingerly. A throbbing head made each slight movement torturous. A laugh tinkled out, grew brighter, carolled its way round the room into my somewhat numbed senses. I stared. It came from a settee a couple of yards away. Its owner was the most alluring thing in skirts I'd seen for a long time. A lovely but dangerous animal, with a lithe sinuous body beautifully swathed in some dark figured silks—European fashion!—a cloud of blue-black hair, dark eloquent eyes, a soft red seductive mouth. . . .

She addressed me half in French and half in Arabic. I answered in French. She then apologised for my condition. It was, she said, the only way she could get contact with me, and she had been wanting to do so for quite a long time. Of course, I had to hold on taut to my hazy senses to make certain I was not dreaming. But she was real enough—a female devil who could be as treacherous as she was fascinating.

My experience of women, not inconsiderable, has taught me to distrust these eyes like black velvet, this silky huskiness of voice. Lovely? Of course. The orbs are delightful to watch, the voice a joy to listen to. That dame could make her voice throb with the very soul of desire, could kindle the sort of light in her eyes that sends men mad. I was, therefore, on my guard from the word "go!"

I was conscious of her hypnotism. Her vamping was bold, unashamed, deliberate. She was trying as much with her brilliant black eyes as with her sensuous voice

to inveigle me in to her service. And I fought against the influence for all I was worth.

"But let me introduce myself. I am Madame Radnowitz," quoth she, with a smile. "And you?"

"They call me 'Digger,'" said I. "God knows why."

It soon became clear that she was accepting me for an educated Arab. She asked me if I knew Europe at all. I nodded. She admitted Hungarian birth. She was what you might call a first class mystery. She poured out spirit for me with hands of a loveliness that would fill your true artist with ecstasy. There were half-a-dozen rings, too, blazing with brilliants. A little fortune, *s'il vous plait*, on milady's hands.

She had the faculty of surprising one. In fact, her conversation with me that bright and sunny morning was just one surprising statement after another. She knew all about the Fourteenth Patrol, and appeared to imagine I was a sort of second-in-command of that famous body of police. She feared it, too. But she thought that with *Monsieur Digger* on her side she would be as safe as houses. She solicited my assistance in outwitting that Patrol! She was overflowing with promises—as much wealth as I could desire, a gay adventurous life, and herself thrown in. "For I like you, *Monsieur Digger*, I like you, I like you! *Je t'adore! Je t'adore!*" And a lot more in the same key.

A trifle swift, I thought.

It seemed it was her good fortune that I should have been seen dogging the footsteps of one of her cultivators. I was given to understand that the poor devil had been committed to the dungeons for wandering too far afield.

D

Virtually I was a prisoner, but the choice remained with me. There was the devil of a gay life ahead, did I but nod. If I had not been so weak, I might have given in; but there is no fighter so stubborn as a healthy man suddenly made weak by a knock on the head. I gathered that the building to which I had been brought was Madame's own country residence, and I suspected that within the grounds of it I should find the cocaine patch I had set out to seek. Obviously, there was nothing I could do, save play for time.

When she spread herself and her draperies on my bed and took my hand in her own soft one, I decided that this was an occasion for the best bit of make-believe I could put up. I begged for time to recover and think this thing out. One could not hope to grasp such a marvellous proposition in a few moments. One would require a day or two to readjust one's mental outlook. I was charmed. I was overwhelmed. I was very conscious of the honour. Madame would understand. She did. Or, at all events, she thought she did. We came appreciably nearer to each other. But she didn't want Madame, from me. Olga, she said. Olga and Digger. I frankly admit, I enjoyed the pretence. Being a man, I was tickled to death.

And I wondered greatly what had become of the other fellow—the guy whose place I was being seduced to fill, for Olga was the type of woman who must have a man, the kind that can't exist for long without one.

I wondered where I was, whether I had strayed far from New Street of ill fame. I wondered even more how long it would take the patrol to locate me, how long I could hold out against the swift and determined advances of this bewitching jezebel.

Olga left me after a while—still wondering these things. I was at liberty to rise when I felt like it, make her castle my home, roam about it and the gardens as I felt inclined. My acting must have been pretty good. After all, there is something in me that compels admiration for the Madame Radnowitz type of feline. I suppose her various and nefarious activities were prompted by much the same feelings as those that impelled me to wander about the earth—South America, India, the Near East, the Foreign Legion, and now the Desert Patrols—a yearning for thrills, excitement, adventure and the fulness of life.

Wherefore I could not resist a tiny spark of fellow feeling, despite the obvious danger signals. As it happened, the feeling served me well in that priceless bit of acting, for she must have seen the admiration in my eyes, and no woman is proof against flattering masculine eyes.

Dressed and refreshed, I wandered about the place. I found it immensely rich in Oriental furnishing and decorations. No one troubled me as I strolled about. Occasionally I ran into a native servant hurrying about his domestic offices, and there was no doubt from their demeanour that they had had their orders regarding myself. Plainly, I was a privileged guest in the house.

In the extensive grounds I came upon that which I had been longing to see—the cocaine patch, the coca shrubs, which, by the way, have nothing to do with cocoa or coco-nuts. The coca shrubs were unmistakable. They stood about six to eight feet high and had the familiar appearance of blackthorn bushes. Valuable as it is, this plant is very easily cultivated. It has vivid

green leaves, which are picked off twice a year and dried by sweating in the sun, after the fashion of tea.

I had seen habitual coca-chewers among the Indians of the Peruvian Andes—"coquards" they are called. And here, in this garden, were ten or a dozen of them, low-caste Arabs with the same habit and the pitch-black mouths. I addressed two or three of them without getting any response, and then I discovered that everyone of them was dumb! Dummies! Olga apparently did not believe in half-measures.

While watching these fellows at work I was able to take stock of my surroundings. A high wall completely enclosed house and grounds, and beyond was a plantation of date palms. What was beyond the plantation I could only guess, and my guess was that it was just desert . . . sand and sand and more sand. This was an oasis of sorts. No sound came from beyond the wall, not any city noises. I was miles away from Baghdad!

On the face of it, hopeless enough. But I had a scheme, and that night I put it into operation. I intended to be on the flat roof of the building bright and early next morning; but first I must get possession of a piece of mirror, a bit of looking-glass. Olga was bound to have something of the sort.

I dined with her that night—just the two of us, with the soft-footed natives waiting upon us. Olga knew quite a lot about food. With her, feeding was an art. And, for a woman, she had an astonishing knowledge of wines. Also she was a most agreeable companion at table.

Filled with good food and plenty of wine, an alluring woman like Olga for companion, the night became a

memorable one for me. She could talk. She was indeed an amazing conversationalist. She had travelled, had had some remarkable experiences, told me the most thrilling yarns—which the wining and the dining and the fullness thereof coloured beautifully.

I did not, however, lose sight of my purpose. We stayed in that settee far into the night, talking and talking, swapping experiences—for was I not an educated and much travelled Arabian? And once, when she came to the powder-and-puff stage, which seems to occur a dozen times a night with the average woman, I begged for the little mirror. She gave it to me with a laugh, thinking, no doubt, that it was just like an Arabian gentleman to ask for a thing like that. Had she known of the use I intended to make of it, she would have knifed me on the spot.

Nor did that strange and perhaps beautiful night of adventure prevent me awaking at the appointed time next morning. The sun was already blazing down when I reached the roof. There was no one there. A man cannot escape from a roof when large grounds surround it. I was perfectly safe as far as the watchers of the household were concerned. I could promenade there to my heart's content.

Underneath my *burnous* I clutched Olga's bit of looking-glass. I raised it to my nose, tasted the scent of her disembodied perfume, for I hoped the mirror was to mean the end of my friendship with Olga. Sad, in a way, but it is all in the life of the Desert Patrol.

From that flat roof I could see beyond the plantation and right across the desert for miles. Vaguely through the heat haze I picked out the forest of domes and minarets that I knew marked the city of Baghdad—

perhaps ten to fifteen miles away; and further still I saw the two golden domes of the famous mosque that lies beyond the North Gate.

I played idly with the mirror, found I could pick up a spot from the sun's rays and flash it on the desert miles away. I chuckled. I had but to wait for a bunch of troops, a stray patrol of desert police, perhaps a camel caravan, or even an aeroplane, and attract attention with my spot of light.

I stumped that roof for hours. I went down for a meal—Madame Radnowitz, I understood, was away on one of her mysterious errands—and returned to pace up and down again. I actually saw figures approaching and leaving Baghdad—and then at long last came a caravan of camels moving obliquely across the sand. I waited until they drew nearer. I was determined they should not pass by.

Then I got busy with the mirror. How feverishly I worked with that spot of sunlight! My flashes attracted their attention. I tried to work out the Morse code. I might be working in vain, since the bunch were probably just an ordinary Arab caravan. At any rate, I had gained their interest. Then another cavalcade came loping along and joined the first. I kept on, repeating and repeating in Morse my position in this oasis. I became so absorbed that I forgot everything else in the excitement of my achievement—until I found myself gripped from behind and thrown to the ground.

Olga was spitting venom. Never had I seen a woman in such a frightful rage. She screamed every sort of dirty imprecation at me as I was led below, and when I was securely bound and thrown into one of the

dungeons, she spat in real earnest. Had I not eaten her salt, shared her couch (untrue!), partaken of her hospitality!

Olga was a sorely disappointed woman. "Hell hath no fury. . . ." I was scum of the desert. This black witch who, only a few hours before, had been draping her lovely self over my shoulder, was now informing me that I was the son of a noseless, inebriated mother who had never married, and that as a dunghill had been my birth-place, she would see to it that it should be my burial ground. Her choice of language would have put to shame that of a Hong Kong dockside labourer or a Billingsgate porter. It was sanguinary to the n^{th} degree.

She screamed, her mouth foamed, her lovely black eyes blazed with incredible ferocity, her superb body shook and vibrated as she crouched over me, lying helpless and bound under her verbal lashes.

Then she calmed down, and that was even worse than the storm. She began to play with a knife, an ornamental thing beautifully chased, but keen as a razor. I thought my last hour had arrived. I can write of it lightly now, but I shall never forget those terror-filled moments. Sometimes I see the beautiful creature, crazy with lust, bending over me in dreams, and I can still sweat with the horror of that memory.

She was proposing in plain, unmistakable terms, to deal with me as the Arab women deal with stray white men they find in the desert—and while still bound, a portion of my clothing was cut away for the easier access of her sadistic pleasures. She stared to find I was white and that only the suntan of my face and neck had helped me to pose as an Arabian. She laughed then, seeing the white nakedness. God! What a laugh!

I had seen the results of obscene mutilation by Arab women, on the bodies of those poor devils who had attempted desertion, failed, suffered unspeakable torture, only to be returned half-dead by Partisans to an indifferent Legion authority. Even had I not seen the actual bodies, there were reminders enough of that ghastly practice in the photographs on the walls of every Legion barrack room.

My flesh crept and shivered as the insane Olga tickled it with her knife, slowly, almost caressingly, while she savoured her pleasures, a grim smile on her soft red mouth. Sweat poured down my face as her soft hands moved. My parched tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. My lips bled under clenched teeth, lest I should blubber and yell like a kid. What prevented me from screaming at the first light touch of that glittering knife I do not know. She was crouching so close to me that I could feel her breath fanning my face, smell again that damnable scent. . . .

On one or two rare occasions since then I have smelled that same scent, and each time that ghastly picture had risen before my eyes . . . that black-eyed witch and her pretty knife.

She played, like the feline she was . . . teasing with the dagger. But human endurance has limits. For the first time in my life—I fainted.

When I opened my eyes again someone was hitting me in the jaw, water was splashing over me, the nicest voice in the world was coming over the void in a breathless sort of fashion:

“Kim on! You son of a bitch! Open up! Kim on, now! Snap out of ut! Oh, boy!”

He of the black silky beard and the Yankee drawl

was bending over me, with the tenderness of a woman in his otherwise steely eyes—though there was nothing tender in his slapping hands.

"All right, Bain," said I. "Hold your wind."

"Gee, boy, but it's good to see you with your lamps lit!"

"Been a long time coming, haven't you?"

"Long time nothing, you big sap! We'd the best part of fifteen miles to cover an' we cleared in under thirty minutes. If you know of any camels that can lope faster, Digger boy, sell 'em to the patrol."

"It seemed like half a year to me."

The American grinned: "I'll say!"

Then the Skipper loomed up, followed by Gyppo and several more of the crowd.

"Hullo, Skipper. You fixed the dope gang?"

"We have, Digger, old man. How d'you feel?"

"Damned thirsty. Did you get the woman?"

"Woman? What woman?"

I explained.

"I guess she got away," grinned Bain.

A thorough search of the building and grounds proved the guess to be correct. She had got away!

CHAPTER V

MANTLE OF MAHOMET

MURAD ALI KHAN IBN RAAD, agitator and seditionist, Moslem by profession rather than faith, had troubled the Eastern world for a year or two before he came into the ken of the Fourteenth Irak Desert Patrol, and its leader, Skipper Armstrong.

The patrol always got their man, and they got Raad eventually, despite the fact that a score of secret service men and women, representing a dozen nationalities with interests in the East, had tried to trap and ambush him without success.

Raad, the self-styled Messiah of Mahomet, had been stumping Moslem country with the avowed intention of creating a rising—through India, Africa, and then Arabia. He had lately been at work in Morocco, Alexandria, Port Said, Beirut, and that hot-bed of the Faith—Damascus. The scene of his crowning achievement was to be Baghdad, since that ancient city was the soul and centre of the whole Moslem world.

We had learned that this fanatic, carrying the mantle of Mahomet, had left Damascus for Baghdad. His years of activity were to culminate there in a gigantic Islamic Revolution, and he was to achieve his great ambition by fanning the flames that are lit once a year in all Moslem cities when the Feast of Moharrem is celebrated.

The Feast of Moharrem is a barbaric affair that takes place in the open streets. For ten days and

ten nights the devotees of Imam Hussien Ali, son of Mahomet, parade the open thoroughfares, praying, singing, chanting, beating themselves with chains, and generally working up to the required state of abject devotion for the Feast in the Mosques.

We had news at Ramadi that Raad was crossing by camel caravan, in the traditional manner of all great prophets, and that he would reach Baghdad on the fifth day of Moharrem—just as the frenzy of the devotees was becoming heated.

The presence of a fanatic like Raad on such an occasion meant that anything might happen. He had sworn that the Tigris and the Euphrates should flow crimson with the blood of the infidels. He was to start a conflagration in the oldest city in the world that would set the whole East alight—and a portion of the West as well, since he had put himself at the head of the Moslems the world over, a virile community which to-day numbers two hundred and fifty millions.

It all sounded like the fiery dreams of a madman to me. And so it was. The madman with the Mantle of Mahomet had a following, however, and much blood might be shed. Kaiser Wilhelm was mad, so was Napoleon, so were the Romans, the Crusaders, and the Persian hordes that once swept over this same Babylon; but their madness of vision brought untold misery to millions.

In Baghdad, with its population of 250,000 there are 60,000 Jews and 35,000 other non-Moslems. Always a difficult period for those who did not participate in the Feast, anxiety on this particular occasion was more than usually grave, and extra precautions were taken to prevent the barbaric celebrations from developing into a bloody revolution.

A much greater display was made of the notices regarding the Feast, which are issued by the Moslem leaders every year, these being more prominently posted throughout the cities and towns of Irak in the hope of creating a less antagonistic feeling towards all those not of the Faith. As being of some historical interest, one is herewith reproduced:

“Baghdad, 26th Moharrem.

“To the Emir and British Governors.

“The Government of Great Britain, always gracious to her subjects and heedful of their religious obligations and customs, has again given permission for the performance of the ceremonies in which is represented the great catastrophe of the slaughter of our lord the Imam Hussein Ali. This will be remembered with due gratitude. The tongue is short and the pen will wear out in expressing our thanks to the Governors and Commissioners in their endeavours to protect, revere and honour the devotions of the processions. We, therefore, representing the Shias in general, express our gratitude to the authorities, whom God preserve so long as there are days and nights.”

“Say! Ja think these’ll have any effect on his lordship, Ibn Raad, huh?”

Bain, thoroughly American and therefore cynical, was staring at one of the notices posted up in our headquarters.

“We can’t afford any illusions about him,” opined the Skipper, who could be as satirical as any American, “Listen, you fellows. Raad means business. All this” —he waved a hand at the poster—“is eye-wash as far as he’s concerned.”

"Got a scheme, Skipper Amstring?" queried Gyppo, while the rest of us just stared at the poster and waited.

"We can't arrest him and shove him out of the way," said Armstrong. "That would only be playing into his hands. Just what he'd want. He'd love to play the martyr. No. He must enter Baghdad with all due pomp and ceremony. We have the job of escorting his caravan from Ramadi to Baghdad. We have to work out our scheme while we're doing that. Gyppo! D'you think you could produce Zara by to-morrow morning?"

"What—the lovely Armenian woman who helped us at Tasa?"

"The same. I think she's the solution of this problem," added the Skipper mysteriously.

And that was all we could get out of Armstrong for the moment. Never a fellow for chin-wagging, on this highly important occasion he left us completely in the dark. We could only speculate—and await developments. The developments were, to say the least, decidedly puzzling. In fact, no one could discover until the affair was all over just what part the beautiful Zara was playing in this extremely delicate situation.

Gyppo spent the remainder of that day, as well as most of the night, in visiting Tasa and returning with the smiling Zara. She, remembering how Armstrong had once saved her sister from something worse than death, was more than willing to perform whatever part the Skipper should allot her. To me it was beginning to look as if she were to become a regular member of our espionage service. Certainly, she made the loveliest decoy.

Nevertheless, when a week later we joined up with the caravan of the infamous Ibn Raad to escort it on the

last lap of the journey to Baghdad—Zara had disappeared. We took to the road, a most imposing cavalcade, first came the great prophet and his suite on a score of camels, then his band of fifty disciples, also on camels, then a long string of pack mules. Down each flank of this cavalcade rode the Fourteenth Irak Desert Patrol in single file, with the Skipper and myself at the head and leading the way.

All that first day the Skipper spoke only once.

"If I thought I were leading this swob to a bloody revolution in Baghdad . . . I'd finish the lot of 'em now!"

We had to pull up at every village and hamlet *en route*, for the natives crowded about us, crying out for the Prophet Raad's blessings, which he gave most magnanimously. In that trek we had all the illustration we could wish for regarding the fellow's immense power over the Moslem populace. His name had indeed spread far and wide.

I shall be very old before I forget an incident that occurred on the evening of that first day. We were crossing a lonely stretch of desert at the hour of sunset when, out of the blue as it seemed, there came the solitary figure of a woman. She appeared, in that hour of colour and mysticism, like some wraith, some spectre of an age-old legend, rising as she did from the very dust at our feet.

She advanced towards the camel of the prophet, hands outstretched in supplication, a beautiful figure in rags the colour of the dust from which she had so gracefully risen. Her clothes were so dilapidated, so scanty as to display the shapeliness of her limbs, the round suppleness of her arms, and even the white



[Photo : Central Press Photos, Ltd.

STREET SCENE IN BAGHDAD
With a typical mosaic minaret in the right foreground.

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dust of the ground had but served to soften and give a peculiar bloom to the creaminess of her skin. Her eyes shone with the timidity of a gazelle in the pale but perfect oval of her face.

Zara, of course. I thought her appearance not merely dramatic but decidedly subtle, peculiarly *Oriental!* Of a truth, the Armstrong touch! No sudden appearance could have been more impressive to the superstitious minds of that throng, nor of that Prophet of prophets whose omens, divinations, forebodings, portents and sorcery had carried him so far. A touch of genius! The Skipper was an artist and an artiste, a seer with a material mind, as subtle as the devil himself!

There was no doubt about the success of the girl's aim from the very word "go!" The story she told in the awesomeness of that blood-red desert sunset was supremely beautiful in the telling, her supplication a superb piece of acting. She impressed even me. She impressed even the hard-bitten Skipper. Most of all did she impress Ibn Raad. There was compassion in the man's eyes. And in the crook of his features there was something else, for his eyes had seen the beauty that is woman. . . .

Prophet or no prophet, he was a man, and human, and therefore susceptible. An old, old story? True. But what official mind would plan to settle the hash of so dangerous an agitator-cum-prophet with so ancient a device? The official minds had left it to Skipper Armstrong because of his reputation for appreciating the native mentality. Had they asked him to explain his scheme, it would in all probability have been pooh-poohed. Fortunately he was given a free hand.

The tale she told was nothing unusual. It was the kind of tale that had been told for centuries by lovely women. It was the telling that mattered. I did not know then that the girl adored, worshipped Armstrong, that she would do anything for him, give away her very soul in his service. Evidence of that stupendous fact came later. And it more than explained her amazingly clever acting on that particular occasion.

Ibn Raad was touched by her story, her wonderful devotion to the cause he had so much at heart. He would, he said, see to it that she should be present to witness his . . . the great triumph of the Moslem cause. He would even make himself personally responsible for her safe conveyance to the centre of that world-rocking triumph—Baghdad.

Whereupon he took her into his own saddle for her safe conveyance . . . to say nothing of his own undoubted pleasure; and he was astute enough to make of the occasion an example of compassion before the lord Allah, of which his followers and hangers-on duly approved.

That, however, was by no means a settlement of the now-urgent problem. If it were being left to Zara to prevent Raad from setting a light to the powder-magazine laid bare in Baghdad during Moharrem, I certainly did not envy her her task. No matter how strongly or subtly she might weave her spell about the prophet, however alluringly she exerted her woman's wiles, she could never hope to turn the fanatic from his purpose. He saw himself king of the Moslem world, ruler over two hundred and fifty million subjects, originator of the mightiest dynasty the world had ever known—and it was hardly on the cards that even the

most fascinating baggage alive would persuade him to deviate one iota.

An extract from my diary would not, I fancy, be out of place at this point. It gives far better than my memory could, a picture of the barbaric scenes of Moharrem as we found them on arrival in the ancient capital.

“There could not be a more awe-inspiring, more blood-curdling sight than this! The celebrations of Moharrem make the most amazing religious festival it is possible to behold. It continues for ten days. We entered Baghdad on the third day, and already the frenzied fanatics were growing heated against the final feast in the mosques. Many hundreds of Moslems were parading in processions through the streets. Their heads were bloody but not bowed. Some were belabouring their bare chests until the blood flowed profusely. These were devotees chosen to do physical penance in memory of Hussein, son of the Prophet Mahomet, who was murdered . . . twelve hundred years before! They punished themselves with chains, knives, iron bars, some having cut their heads until they were a mass of blood. Others had great coloured bruises about shoulders and chest. . . .

“The chief procession carried at its head an effigy of the great Hussein’s headless body, followed by the mourners careering crazily along in zig-zag fashion, beating and chanting, while their brethren among the watchers set up a terrific howling and shrieking in a key to make the blood run cold. . . .

“As the yelling devotees went by, natives in the crowded alleys of the bazaars joined in the shrieking and chanting until the racket became ear-piercing. Blood spattered the dust of the roadway. . . .

“Huge flares lit up the streets during the nights of Moharrem. They were carried on the top of long

poles and waved wildly about so as to clear a way for the advancing and ever-increasing processions.

"Seven days of Moharrem! The last four days have been like living on the brink of a volcano . . . in which we might be precipitated at any moment! The extraordinary thing is that we have passed the fatal fifth day, when the self-styled prophet was to make his gigantic throw for world dominance—and nothing has happened! Why? Has Zara succeeded in turning him away from the great aim for which he has laboured so many years? But how?

"Eighth day of Moharrem! Still nothing has happened—save that the devotees have become more blood-thirsty in their self-punishment. We of the patrol have seen nothing of Ibn Raad, or the girl Zara, since we brought the 'Holy Caravan' in to Baghdad on the third day. It is beginning to look as if that girl had achieved the impossible! I have patrolled the streets with other members of the patrol, natives among natives in our enveloping *burnous* and hooded headcloths—and never so much as a glimpse of the new prophet among these frenzied devotees. What has happened to him?

"Ninth day of Moharrem! The Skipper is now confident that we shall pass through the heated period without any trouble from the agitator who attempted to assume the Mantle of the Prophet. It looks as if we shall. Now a matter of hours. The din on the streets, night and day, is deafening. The Patrol is utterly weary, having found it almost impossible to rest or sleep during the past few days. . . .

"There is still a great coming and going at the 'Sacred House' where we left the Prophet and his suite, also Zara, on our arrival in the city. A mysterious house indeed. I have watched it a great deal. It is impossible to gather anything from the demeanour

of the high priests who enter the place so hurriedly—and leave it in the same manner. Obviously, Ibn Raad must still be there, or there would have been a great hue and cry for him before now. Why doesn't he come out? Why will he not show his face? He has been preparing for this world-rocking event for years—and now? Is he afraid? How can a mere girl have achieved this miracle?

"Tenth and final day of Moharrem. We are beginning to breathe more freely. This taciturn blighter, Armstrong, tells us to be patient. We shall know all in a few hours. He knows that Zara has carried out her task successfully, but the exasperating devil won't say how! 'And how? And how? And how?' Bain can be as bad as the Skipper with his sickening repetition of that silly phrase."

How well I remember making those entries in my diary! They were written to the accompaniment of hoarse, raucous chanting and high, piercing shrieks. They were jotted down during the night and in the small hours, when sleep was impossible. They bring back memories of the most nerve-wracking week of my life, and one that I hope never to repeat!

All things have but a time, however. The close of the tenth day found the mosques filling and the thoroughfares quietening. It was all over and the ghastly revolution had certainly not taken place.

The next day we were up at dawn. The patrol had an escort job. We had been asked to escort Ibn Raad from the city before the populace were awake! When the great prophet came forth to mount his camel preparatory to moving off, he was so closely hooded that we could see nothing but his ferocious, his baleful black eyes!

My job on that strange retreat was to tail the cavalcade with Zara in my saddle, *and see that no harm came to her!* Nothing could have pleased me more, since I was dying to know how she had accomplished the impossible.

We had hardly left the city walls behind before I had fired the query that had tortured me for days. She laughed! Gosh! How she laughed, trilling her lovely music up and down the scale. Her gazelle-like eyes blinked mischievously. Her full mouth bubbled with merriment. When she had grown tired of laughing she began to talk instead. She was, she said, laughing from sheer relief. The last few days had been a great strain. I did not doubt it. It had been hellish enough for me. What must it have been like for her—playing the principal part?

"But it was very simple, Digger. So very simple. It was Armstrong Sahib who thought it all out. He is a great man, a great good man. I would do anything for him . . . anything. . . ."

She closed her eyes tightly for a few seconds.

"Anything," she repeated, almost in a whisper. "But you are impatient, and I must tell you, for you are his big friend. It was simple. Ibn Raad and I became very close friends, very close, even before we reached Baghdad. We became very much more before the passing of the first night, for I shared his bed. It was not pretty, not pleasant: but I made the appearance of great joy in him, so that he was truly deceived. It was thus on the second night and the third—and on the fourth, the eve of the great day. That night he slept heavily because of that which I had placed in his coffee, and while he slept I shaved off his beard!"

I gasped.

"Shaved off his beard!"

"But, yes! I shaved him as clean as any baby. Do you not see, he was then a beardless boy."

I roared.

"A most humiliating condition for any Moslem, not to say teacher and prophet!"

"But, yes, Digger Sahib. A beardless boy at whom Allah, Imam Hussein Ali, and all his two hundred and fifty million followers would but laugh and jeer. For it is known that in the eyes of all true Moslems there is no greater abasement, no more certain road to the absolute loss of caste, than that a grown man, much less a teacher and a prophet, as you say, should be foolish enough to lose his beard. There never was a prophet without a beard! How could Ibn Raad show his face among those mad worshippers?"

How indeed!

CHAPTER VI

MYSTERY OF THE ABANDONED MOTOR CAR

To find an abandoned motor car, with its wheels in the air, in the heart of wild and hilly country, is to assume only one thing—bandits. We, the Fourteenth Irak Patrol, had been scouting for the past week, “living on the country,” with orders not to return to headquarters at Ramadi without one Khan Nekh Sudah and his thieving, cut-throat band of Kurds. There had been many reports regarding their nefarious activities on the Baghdad-Aleppo Road, and our job was to take Sudah prisoner, dead or alive.

The derelict car looked remarkably like a clue. But it was well off the road, and how it had been driven into that rocky country was a mystery. *Why* it should have been driven to that wild spot was an even greater mystery. We were then some seventy miles from Ramadi and in the most God-forsaken quarter of Northern Arabia it is possible to find. It seemed clear that the Khan Sudah and his merry men had been at work again.

And that but recently. When set on its wheels the car was seen to be in good repair and running order, and though dust-grimed, it proved to be an expensive specimen of a well-known make. Moreover, it was decidedly warm in the bonnet. Judging by the petrol tank and the state of the engine, someone must have been driving it not many hours before.

"It's ruining a good bus to drive it over country like this," opined Gyppo.

"Guess the driver thought he was trekking with one of those goldarned caterpillars," grinned Bain.

"But if this is Sudah's work . . . why didn't he destroy the machine? It's not like him to leave it around for anybody to pick up. These fellows generally destroy things they've no use for."

"Say! Mebbe they're coming back, Digger."

"Everything points to the fact that they left it in a hurry," said the Skipper, quietly. "I'll wager it was running an hour ago or less. It looks to me as if they hadn't time to do more than tip her over before they scuttled."

"Ja think they spotted somebody, Skipper? Us, mebbe?"

"It looks very like it. They might have seen us topping that ridge, four or five miles back. They're long-sighted devils, anyway."

"An' they didn't wait to greet us. Nope!"

"If we're slick enough," snapped Armstrong, "we should catch up with them very soon. Get moving now! Take my beast, Digger, and I'll see if I can still drive a car."

The Patrol mounted again and moved off, led by Skipper Armstrong in the swell touring car. His progress over that broken and boulder-strewn ground was not exactly swift, but the vehicle climbed and dipped like a caterpillar and without mishap.

In half-an-hour we had come upon a habitation of sorts, a tiny Bedouin hamlet. We stowed the car in the courtyard of the headman, and then proceeded to search every nook and cranny of the village. We

questioned the populace, or at any rate, our native members, the Wahabis, did so for us; while the Skipper, with his uncanny mastery of dialects, attended to the headman and his family. The result was nil.

Getting blood out of a stone is easier than obtaining information from an Arab who has made up his mind to say nothing. Not that he remains actually dumb. On the contrary, he will talk for hours—and convey precisely nothing at all.

I could not help contrasting our raid on that village with the raids we used to make in those faraway days of the Foreign Legion. The attitude of the patrol on such occasions was that of friendly visitors. That of the Foreign Legion was nearly always of marauding bandits.

The Legion patrols were often sent out to scattered villages and farmsteads to collect taxes. If the taxes were not instantly forthcoming, thieving, looting, brutal floggings and the rape of women and children became the order of the day. I am afraid that I, and my ex-legionnaire friends of the Irak Patrols, retained some ghastly memories of those tax-gathering expeditions.

We passed on to the outlying farmsteads, spending hours in searching and making investigations. We were given dates, mellons, pomegranates and bread, as well as bundles of camel-thorn for our beasts—but never a word about the Khan Sudah and his elusive gang.

Mounted, of course. But in that difficult country we were unable to find any traces of hoof imprints, and we rather had the impression that we were on the wrong track.

Until well into the afternoon of that day, when, entering a gulley, we were pulled up sharply by a hail of bullets. Our beasts, highly-trained, racing dromedaries, flopped to knee on the instant. Luckily we were moving in the shelter of a wooded bank. Crouching over the beasts in this cover we could see, some four hundred yards ahead, a breastwork of boulders in the shelter of the trees on the opposite bank.

The Skipper rapped out an order, and we gave them volley for volley. It soon became evident that, though they had the advantage of position, being higher up the bank, their marksmanship was of a very indifferent order. They appeared to be using all manner of ancient pieces. One of our camels was literally slaughtered by a soft slug of lead they sent over—a beastly sort of bullet to have ricochetting about your body.

We, on the other hand, had recently equipped ourselves with up-to-the-minute, nickel-steel "Germansers," thanks to one gun-running Gruener. We were therefore thoroughly enjoying ourselves with the new toys, for this was the first time we had occasion to use them in battle of any sort. Shooting is never the same in practice, and a toy's a toy, however old the boy may be. Our nickel-steel weapons behaved beautifully.

"Say!" chuckled a voice within a yard of me, "these Germans may be down and out, but, O boy, don't they know how to make a rod! I guess this is the slickest rod I've ever handled. . . ."

But the fire from that breastwork of stone was diminishing. It looked as if it were only a matter of minutes before we should walk over and collect the goods.

Then there came a sudden hullabaloo from behind that wall of boulders, hoarse shouts mingled with the cries and shrieks of women.

"Waal, I guess there ain't no Amazons in these parts, huh?"

"Amazons be jiggered," snapped Armstrong. "More likely the women from that touring car."

"Are you sure, Skipper Amstring," put in Gyppo. "It sounds like an Arab trick to me."

"Imitating women in distress, eh, Gyppo."

"I wouldn't put it past them, Digger."

The Skipper was quiet and thoughtful. The sounds were dying away, receding, like sound moving into the distance. The firing had ceased altogether. Was this lull a ruse? Was it an attempt to get us into the open and then take pot shots?

Armstrong decided to rush the place. There was no doubt in his mind about the cries of these women. Nor was there any in mine. Ruse or no, we could not give the bandits the benefit of the doubt.

We mounted and loped those few intervening yards in about three minutes. Not a shot came our way. We suspected the worst. The women had made that hullabaloo when the bandits made off with them. Clearly, they had wanted to attract our attention.

We jumped the breastwork and found—one outlaw, and he was dead. That fellow must have stayed on, waiting for certain death, while his brethren got away under cover of his fire and the cries of the women. Well, they could have gone only a little way. They had the advantage, however, in that they knew every inch of those hills and valleys and we did not.

Beyond the breastwork was a thick belt of trees. One half of the patrol raked this fore and aft, in extended order, while the other skirted the fringe with the camels. On the other side we came upon a clearing of sand, and the unmistakable imprint of hoofs. We mounted and trekked in the wake of these marks at top speed.

We kept up that trek for the better part of an hour, and then came on to a ledge of rock skirting the hillside, where the hoof-impressions disappeared altogether.

All through that night we trekked blindly, sullenly, knowing that we had had the outlaws within our grasp and had allowed them to get away. It wasn't a pleasant reflection. By now, every man was convinced that those shrieks we had heard were the cries of women in distress, and not any sort of trickery on the part of the Kurds.

The dawn came up in a wild flash of colour, suddenly, blindingly, as it often does in the East. We had climbed steadily throughout the night. The light now showed us a vast panorama of hill and valley, a magnificent spectacle with an awe-inspiring grandeur—had we the mood to appreciate it. Instead, we sent off two Cossacks and two Wahabis to scout over the wild and difficult countryside.

We plodded steadily on, stopping neither for rest nor food. Most of us could, of course, sleep in the saddle, and eating there was the simplest matter. Presently there came the sudden crack of a rifle, shattering the deep mountain silence. It was the signal from our scouts.

We persuaded our beasts to show what they could do. They were fine animals, not one of them had yet

reached the age of ten, and of course the racing dromedary is at his best between four and fourteen years. We were soon covering the ground at the rate of thirty miles an hour, the long legs of the beasts working like huge pistons.

We reached a high plateau and saw our scouts standing perilously in the saddle and waving their firearms. Coming up with them we were shewn a sight of our quarry, a moving speck descending towards a cleft in the hills. Within half an hour we were hanging on to their tails, harassing them with shot, and generally making their progress exceedingly difficult.

There seemed to be about thirty or forty men in the gang, and presently a number of them in the rear halted and opened fire on us. This in no way checked our headlong rush, since we were all trained in the art of firing from the hip while loping along at top speed. They thought to pull us up and give time to the remainder to get away with the women.

The manœuvre failed miserably. In fact, it was very bad tactics, since we experienced no difficulty in overpowering the small detachment. That done, we secured them to their own horse-saddles and their mounts to our own, and away we raced towards the remainder.

There wasn't even the semblance of a scrap. A handful of shots and we were surrounding them. Perhaps it was just as well. We were considerably embarrassed by the presence of screaming women. We were no more anxious to fire on those helpless women than they were to hit their own men now riding with us.

The patrol surrounded the bunch. They were just

rag-tag and bobtail, regular scallywags of the mountains—save their chief, the Khan Nekh Sudah, of whom we had heard so much. He was a fine, well set up ruffian, black-haired, black-eyed, with fierce-looking up-turned moustaches. No felt-cloth cap and sacking was his. He was turned out in full riding kit, over which he wore, cape fashion, a black camel's-hair *abba* of as rich a quality as that worn by our own Skipper.

The two leaders faced each other, as if each were taking the measure of the other. Armstrong addressed the Khan in his own language, pointing to the two women strapped to the backs of the bandits' mounts. The Khan threw back his head and laughed insolently. The next moment he had measured his length in the dust, a sadder if not wiser man.

The work of binding the outlaws with halter ropes did not occupy us long. When all was secure, we turned to the two women, to the Skipper, the most disagreeable part of the job. When they were released and standing on their own feet in the roadway it was seen that they were not merely European, but decidedly English-looking.

One of them was a very attractive blonde, looking for all the world as if she were taking part in a cinema story. Her clothes, though somewhat bedraggled and dust-grimed, were fashionable and well cut. The other girl, who turned out to be the maid, was a plump, dark-haired, rosy-cheeked hussy of the genus cockney. The amazing thing was that neither seemed very perturbed at finding themselves in so perilous a position.

The blonde addressed Armstrong in halting Arabic.

"Of course, they take us for another bunch of natives!" I laughed.

"Well, ain't you!" cried the red-faced one, while the blonde stared hard with her big baby-blue eyes.

"We are not!" snapped the Skipper. "For your information, we are the Fourteenth Irak Desert Patrol—police of these parts."

"Oh!"

The ejaculation came in unison from two silly rounded mouths. They seemed greatly disappointed to find we were not real Arabs but only masquerading as such!

"And we thought you were real sheiks on camels!" cried the rosy-cheeked one. "Lor, fency you being Henglish!"

"Isn't it just as well for you that we are?" snorted the Skipper. "Or would you prefer to associate with real sheiks, as you call them?"

"Oh! Ain't you a sell!"

"Shut up, Mabel!" The blonde girl turned to the Skipper. "We naturally thought you were another band of Arabs—dressed as you are. But you are policemen, you say?"

"That's so. Where are your companions?"

"Companions? What companions?"

"D'you mean to say you were alone in that car?"

"Well, of course!"

This rather staggered us for a minute, even the Skipper.

"Really! And you think it perfectly safe for two women to career about the desert in a car—alone?"

"I don't see why not!" and the thin artificial line of her eyebrows rose.

"You wouldn't!"

"How dare you talk to me like that!"

"Madam, whether you like it or not, you are now in my custody, and until I hand you over to the Commissioner at Ramadi, you will do exactly as I tell you. . . ."

"Oooh!" squeaked her companion, while the blonde girl flushed scarlet, bit her lip, and glared.

It did not look as if the damsel in distress and Skipper Armstrong were to get on very well together. I doubt if the blonde beauty had ever been spoken to in her life in quite that brusque manner, and there was no doubt about her resentment. She introduced herself as Elsa Grayson and her maid as Mabel Hicks.

Elsa was one of those wealthy young moderns, blasé, sophisticated, ineffably bored with life. It transpired that she had been seeking diversion—or sensation—in travel. She had left Damascus, which she had reached after a zig-zag tour of the Mediterranean, in her high-powered car, accompanied by her maid. Their intention had been to cross the Syrian desert to Baghdad. But apparently they did not greatly care what happened, so long as something *did* happen.

Something did. They lost their way in a crazy dash north—instead of north-east. The next thing they knew was the close proximity of a bunch of blood-thirsty Kurds. Whereupon both these silly women instantly fell in love with the "Sheik" of the band, his lordship Khan Nekh Sudah!

The hussy of a maid appeared to have enjoyed the escapade as much as her mistress, her chief ambition in life being to fall into the hands of Arabs, preferably

of the wild variety. Both of them had the "Sheik complex" rather badly, and one gathered they had fed a natural craving for romance "at the pictures."

The two had had the shock of their silly lives when they discovered we were authoritatively English. As the Skipper had suggested, the Kurds had spotted us coming over that ridge and had made off with the women as quickly as their mounts could go. The girls had then been under the impression that a rival band of Arabs were attacking in order to secure *them* as the prize.

The silly wenches had even looked forward to being transferred to the more romantic camels. All this came out while we were returning with them and our prisoners to Ramadi, and it mostly came from the sentimental and romantic Mabel Hicks, since her mistress had shut her mouth like a trap and refused to associate with any of the "policemen."

It was quite impossible to make them realise that they had escaped, by the skin of their teeth, the most ghastly experience a white woman could endure!

Armstrong was, of course, quite out of countenance with the women. His attitude from the beginning was decidedly contemptuous. When he had the whole band of Kurds tied to the hind quarters of their own mounts, the girls thought him the most disgusting, loathsome and brutal monster they had ever met—and said as much. They were forced to accept a guard in the car, and myself as driver, a very humiliating position for Mademoiselle Elsa.

The only man among us who seemed to make any headway with the girls was Bain. Mabel Hicks took

to his Yankee idioms at once. Doubtless Bain's country has a lot to answer for in the matter of educating little girls of the Mabel type. At all events, the "talkies" had given her quite a flair for "Oh, yeahs" and "Sez yous."

"Say, kid, weren't youse scared when the rods were poppin'?"

"Oh, boy! I'll say!" chortled rosy cheeks, utterly abandoning all her expensive cockney education.

And so on and so on, all the nauseating way to Ramadi, which, by the way, we did at a funereal crawl. The reason for our pace was two-fold. In the first place, the bandits' mounts could not move very quickly owing to the peculiar way their owners were strapped to them; and secondly, the Skipper was anxious that the two women should have their fill of adventure before we reached Ramadi. Looking back on it now, I fancy it *was* a lesson to them.

When we started off Elsa was hating the Skipper like poison, and if looks could kill he would have been stone dead before we had covered the first mile. Later I caught her glancing in his direction and there was something rather puzzling about her looks. On the second day of that deadly crawl she was looking at him with that in her baby eyes which was certainly not hate.

The fact is that before we had covered half the journey the spoiled creature was beginning to find something attractive in the brutal demeanour of the patrol leader! And soon she did not care who knew it! Briefly, she became so enamoured of the "strong silent man" that she was actually making overtures to him by the time we had reached our destination.

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She ended by boldly asking him to be her personal escort as far as Baghdad. Not very astonishing perhaps in that type of woman. What did astound us all, however, was the fact that Skipper Armstrong did not say nay!

It only serves to show that you never can tell with these "strong silent men!"

CHAPTER VII

HUNTED!

THE flat sanded waste beyond the camp was shining like polished steel, a moon-drenched desert that floated in a clear white silence. I sat staring upon it, feeling pretty sick over the nauseating events of the day, unimpressed by that beauty, wishing I were back in civilisation—Paris, Berlin, New York, London!

London! I might have been a million miles from that fascinating city. I stared at the shimmering sand and tried to picture Piccadilly, that brilliant centre of lights, bright faces, pretty frocks, lovely women, that merry-go-round of taxicabs and red omnibuses, with Eros topping it all, a tiptoe poise.

Man is a dissatisfied animal. I have stood amid all that glamour of the Circus, an Aussie world-wanderer, wishing I were back on the trail, back in the East with its crazy sights and sounds and smells, its mysterious and sensual beauty, its atmosphere at once turbulent and serene.

I have felt my hand itching for the knife-hilt or the trigger-guard, wanted my cheek against the hard stuff of the rifle-butt, longed to smell the wood of cooking fires, and I have become a soul yearning for desert peace and mountain pass, for the stealthy stalk and the mad, exhilarating gallop.

But that is only the East one dreams about while standing in the centre of the glare and racket of

Piccadilly. They are both brilliant—and both are heartless. And there is another East, cruel as hell, sickening, barbaric and treacherous.

We'd just had more than a taste of it. On patrol during the morning near Jerablus, where the Germans in pre-war days had built a bridge over the Euphrates in their ambitious Berlin-to-Baghdad scheme, we had come upon a Bedouin encampment of black tents. The tiny gathering looked innocent enough—if an Arab camp can look innocent!—until the Skipper took it into his head to investigate.

We brought the camels to knee and invaded the camp. The Bedouins eyed us with suspicion and uneasiness—but then they always do. On this occasion, however, they had good reason. We turned over one tent to find three of the Arab women with a naked man under them, and a white man at that.

Bain, our Yankee member with the beard like black silk, made a similar discovery in another tent—except that the white man found was beyond all human aid. By the time we had rounded up the mob, quite a number had managed to get away; but we had the women directly concerned in the ghastly atrocity, together with a few of their menfolk, a score of prisoners in all.

We found the clothes of these white men—Legion uniforms, two more miserable wretches on the run. It would be interesting to learn how many escape from that ill-fated force in the course of a year. The total must run into hundreds. And how many of them get away?

We might have guessed who and what they were when we came upon the brown women busy with their knives—for the natives had been deceived by our

burnous and headcloths, until we had dismounted and unceremoniously thrust ourselves amongst them. By which time it was really too late to hide the handiwork of the women.

Even Gyppo was sick when we tackled the gruesome job of re-assembling the dead man, and, the Lord knows, that rascal was tough enough. Like several more of us, he had seen the sort of thing before; but it is the sort of thing that any man, even an uneducated half-breed, could never look upon without a feeling of overwhelming nausea. Only nomad Arabs can look upon such mutilations unmoved. In fact, they enjoy them, since they are the perpetrators, committing the most bestial atrocities in the name of Allah.

Of the sexes, the mentality of the women is perhaps the more amazing and the more difficult to appreciate. They approach this sort of sadistic indulgence positively gloating. They make sport of the white body of the unbeliever, not so much from malice or hate of the infidel, but from sheer wanton amusement. If there is anything more inimical to all human decency in the world I should not like to meet it. And it cannot be laid at the door of savagery or mere barbarism, for in many respects the Bedouin is more cultured than the Westerner.

One of the poor wretches was dead, but for the other there seemed just a chance. While the Cossacks and the Wahabis secured the prisoners, we did what we could for the sadly mutilated fellow.

He revived somewhat and began to talk. It is notorious that every Legionnaire has a story. I have heard a great many of them, most of which leave Baron Munchausen's tales staggering at the post; but I

believed this legionnaire to be in too serious a condition for wild flights of imagination.

He was an Austrian using the name of Frith. He had lifted some twenty thousand dollars from the premises of an American tourist company in Paris. A particularly smart French detective got on his trail. Frith decided to disappear for a year or two and joined the Foreign Legion.

The French sleuth, determined to get his man, followed him into the Legion. They met in Sidi-bel-Abbes, the African headquarters of the famous *Cavalerie à pied*. Whereupon the sleuth denounced Frith before the G.O.C. He may have been a good detective. Certainly he was a tenacious one. But he knew little about the Foreign Legion.

The Commanding Officer pointed out that they had both enlisted in the Foreign Legion for the usual term of five years. He hoped they would make good soldiers. As to what may have happened in their civilian days—that, of course, could have nothing to do with the Foreign Legion. The Foreign Legion never knew anything about the civilian lives of its soldiers, and cared less. As friend Bain remarked: "It was just too bad for the sleuth."

That, however, was by no means the end. The story soon went round the barrack square. A man who has money may have quite a decent time in Legion barracks—providing he knows how to use it. Frith had no option. As soon as it became known that he had money he was a marked man. He just had to use it to escape dirty fatigues, dirtier punishments and irksome parades. N.C.O.'s with a penchant for that sort of thing left Frith in no doubt about their powers.

Frith, apparently a somewhat thrifty soul, bribed his way into a draft bound for Damascus with the idea of putting an end to bribery. The sleuth got in the same draft and carried the wretched Austrian's story with him. Thus poor Frith—out of the frying pan into the fire.

He found the sergeants in Damascus as insatiable as those of Sidi-bel-Abbes. The smart Alec of the French detective force—sadly trapped himself—was determined that the fugitive should not enjoy his ill-gotten gains, even if he could not be punished for his crime.

It seemed that the detective scarcely left the Austrian's side for a moment, night or day. The story of this strange vendetta became an absorbing topic among all the French colonial forces in the Syrian capital. To see Frith going out of an evening to a café or some shady place of amusement open to legionnaires, was to see him dogged by the relentless Frenchman, who was a sleuth as much by nature as by profession.

There came the day when the two were included in a detachment sent to the desert fort of Derra Zor. There, in that lonely sun-baked corner of the Syrian plains, the sleuth felt he could now relax his grip, sit back and bide his time. But there he made another big mistake. He woke up one night to find Frith's bed empty.

There seemed to have been a certain native cunning about this sleuth. When he made his discovery he did not at once jump to his feet and rouse the garrison. He put two and two together and came to the conclusion that Frith, having grown tired of this relentless persecution, had made of himself a real fugitive by walking

off into the desert. And he lost no time in following the Austrian.

He spent that night and the whole of next day in trailing his man over sanded wastes, through tiny hamlets, over rock-strewn hilly ground. . . . They met. They fought. The battle was long, ferocious and exhausting, out there, in no man's land of Northern Arabia. After which they lay side by side, panting through the night—their second away from the Fort of Derra Zor. Forty-eight hours had gone by. The Frenchman dared not go back to the garrison. He was a deserter now, equally as much as his fugitive pal.

Just as Frith had made him a legionnaire, so Frith had made him a deserter! A deserter! An unwilling deserter! French detective or no, every man's hand was now against him. He was a renegade, a traitor to his mother country. Tricked for a second time, and by an Austrian thief!

When dawn followed that second night the Frenchman, self-appointed Nemesis, staggered over to where Frith lay in the dust, and struck him a vicious blow. That started something. Apparently the second bust-up was far more ferocious and bloodthirsty than the first. It continued, off and on, throughout the day. It must have been a hell of a fight.

The way Frith talked of it to me, in his queer gasping staccato sentences, gave the episode life, a vitality and vividness that has stuck in my memory . . . those two miserable wretches, struggling there in the sand while the dawn broke over the desert, keeping it up hour after hour, just two sand-crazed men alone in a desert world, unfed for two days, mad with thirst and an insane feud that Fate had staged for them.

Le cafard, the beetle of madness that enters the brains of men in the desert, must have been playing havoc with the sleuth. He seemed to have got it on his chest that Frith was responsible for the ghastly plight they were in. It was he who kept up the fight that became a farce. The two would lie back in the dust, shattered, weak and exhausted; and presently the sleuth roused himself to start the mauling and pawing all over again. He made a hundred desperate attempts to get at the Austrian's throat, but was beaten off every time, for Frith knew that if he got that death-lock on him it would be the end.

Darkness descended upon the two demented legionnaires and put a finish to their crazy squabble for that day. Frith told how he lay hour after hour, slowly getting back his strength, waiting for the moment when he might be able to rise to his feet and stagger away into the darkness. Strangely enough, he did not want to sleep. He was too terrified of his companion by this time. And the terror kept him awake.

At last he got to his knees, raising himself on tottering feet and started to creep away. Soon he realised that the Frenchman was creeping and stumbling after him. There was the pair of them, staggering along like drunken men, one after the other in every sense of the word. They continued like that until daylight came again.

"I must have gone mad then!" Frith had said. "That fellow crawling along behind me was like the figure of death stalking me. When the light came up, a great flash in the sky, red as hell, I started to scream. I couldn't stop screaming. . . ."

Then the Bedouins had come up with them, and that was the end. Frith said he had yelled with relief at

the sight of those brown faces. They were fed, put on camels, and carried off. Later, in the encampment, when the two deserters had been handed over to the women, Frith—and his companion, too—had wished to God he had been killed in the fight, for nothing could stand against the gloating torture of those women with the dripping knives. . . .

All for twenty thousand dollars! Money! Everybody's language! The practical cause of all the bloodshed, strife and slaughter in the world!

And here were two renegades, two miserable wretches who had "gone on pump" from *La Légion Étrangère* with the craziest motives imaginable, who, knowing themselves to be deserters, knowing that they were surrounded by enemies—brown, black *and* white—had remained madly antagonistic towards each other!

Now they were in the care of the Fourteenth Irak Desert Patrol. One of them was dead and the other was dying, and I was trying to picture Piccadilly with its lights and laughter and gaiety, and wondering at the inscrutability of a mad world. It all looked so peaceful out there, over that wide expanse of metal-sheeted earth.

I had just come away from those women. Their staring eyes, their exposed brown breasts, their masculine arms of incredible muscle had nauseated me, so that for one mad, impulsive moment I could have taken the knife and done unto them as they had done unto my brothers. . . .

"Waal, Digger, what's going to happen to the women?"

Bain had flopped down beside me in the sand.

"Skipper Armstrong has a passion for justice," I said. "It will be interesting to see!"

For the moment the women were merely tied to camel stakes, looking, with their staring eyes, as if they were about to be burned at the stake. They put a weird complexion on our camp that night, as grotesque a sight as could well be imagined in the light of that leering moon.

Skipper Armstrong was not inclined to do anything with them until next morning. The night passed with two funerals, for, rather to our surprise, the poor hunted Frith followed the hunter in the early hours. And that affected the European element of the patrol to some tune. The Skipper had some difficulty in controlling them. They naturally wanted to attend to the women in their own way.

In such wild country as we were then quartered, with such butchers for company, with a couple of funerals on our hands, it was not difficult to appreciate the angered state of these tough rascals of the patrol. I suspect the Skipper was a trifle uneasy, though he did not show it, of course. He went about as usual, with a dial that might have been chiselled out of rock. He merely observed that he would shoot down the first man who attempted to take the law into his own hands. Altogether, a night to be remembered!

The morning brought his decision. He thought they should be branded before being conveyed to Ramadi for official trial and imprisonment. There were one or two Cossacks amongst us who had considerable achievement in the slick art of throwing a knife. Out of his great knowledge of Arabia and the Arabians, the Skipper spoke of a certain kind of branding that a son, or a daughter, of Mahomet can never forget. He proposed to line them all up, twelve women and seven

men, and have each one attended to separately. The whole bunch would be compelled to watch—each waiting in an agony of suspense for his treatment.

It is a form of Bedouin punishment to throw a short dagger at a man's head in such a way that it cleaves through the hair and causes a superficial but none the less painful scalp branding. Armstrong had a genius for estimating the Arabian mentality, for making the punishment fit the crime according to the native mind. That is why he became so famous, and so much dreaded, throughout the length and breadth of northern Arabia

This form of branding, cruel as it may seem, is quite a popular feature among Bedouin punishments. In fact, some of these nomads, conscious themselves of some transgression concerning their brethren, will deliberately wound themselves in this fashion, and with the blood streaming over the face will go then to the person whom they have wronged.

Nevertheless, it was a hectic morning. It took half-a-dozen stalwart warriors to get some of the women securely tied to the post, for they struggled ferociously, using teeth and claws, yelling and screaming like the wildest of jackals—while a cool, unperturbed Cossack stood a dozen paces back, waiting to throw his knives.

And there was never an error in any of those nineteen cases. As neat a bit of knife work as one could wish to see, a branding that these butchers would remember for the remainder of their lives.

It was always interesting to me to watch the Wahabis in our Patrol, to see how they responded to a particular form of punishment meted out by the Skipper. They were in no way affected by the gory spectacle. They

stood in a bunch, murmuring among themselves with characteristic gestures, unruffled, judicial, impartial, unmoved, for all the world as if they were discussing some problem concerning their tribal formalities.

Desert justice is not easily understood by the Western mind. It can never be appreciated by the light of the preconceptions and prejudices of a stay-at-home civilisation. It can but be summed up in the words —In Arabia one must do as the Arabians do.

CHAPTER VIII

SINGULAR INTERLUDE

It was the very father and mother of a scrap! A few idle moments—and a woman. She was lovely. I will concede that. She certainly shook friend Bain out of his shell. During this queer interlude from our more or less arduous duties of the patrol I saw more of that remarkable citizen of U.S.A. than I had ever done before.

We had delivered our prisoners at Ramadi, had seen the trial of those butchering men and women, and had then proceeded on trek again. We struck a quiet patch. So much so that one blazing afternoon found Bain and I wandering along by the bank of a creek.

It was while he of the black silky beard and the heart of a child was vainly trying to catch salmon from this tributary creek of the Euphrates that we saw the girl coming along.

Now, native girls, veiled or unveiled, pretty or otherwise, were more or less common events in the life of the patrol. Bain, however, professed to find something different in this particular one. She was, he said, "a regular high-shooting peach blossom," and her type, it appeared, was as "rare as snowballs in hell."

She made a pretty picture as she ascended the water's edge a bit higher up-stream. On her head she carried a jar of water, a vessel of the kind used by her forbears

centuries ago. The big jar gave her an attractive balance and poise.

She wore a heavy black robe. It was fastened at the back of her head and fell in voluminous folds. Underneath fluttered gaily-coloured skirts. Large earrings swayed with her every movement. She had stuck a "shoot" from the pod of a date palm in front of her black hair, and it swayed in the breeze like an osprey will on the head of a girl back home.

Catching sight of us, she laughed, plucked the date wisp from her hair, and threw it in our direction. In another second she had caught up the water vessel and was hurrying away. Bain picked up the pieces of the "shoot" which had separated with the fall, and there was an unmistakable twinkle in his eye.

There is a law in some parts of the desert that governs just such situations as this. If a man molests a girl between sunrise and noon, he is knifed; if between noon and sunset, he is merely flogged; but if after sunset, nothing happens, because the girl should be in her tent and under the protection of her family.

It wanted three or four hours to sunset—not that we were considering the point at all. I doubt if we gave the moral aspect of the question a thought. Moreover, we were not very far from the Baghdad-Aleppo Road, within a few miles of Ramadi, and that girl did not have the appearance of an Arabian, either. Altogether, a very interesting situation.

At all events, there was a spice of mystery and risk about the invitation that two idle men found difficult to resist. We gathered up our *burnous* and followed in the wake of that little girl. It seemed that we carried on for miles, first along the banks of the creek, then

through a long grotto of palms—where we lost sight of her for a while—until we emerged on to a clearing and came to an abrupt halt.

We had come upon a small native encampment, composed of five black camel's-hair tents with a reed and matting structure in the background. It was surrounded by date palms. Beyond the tents camels knelt motionless. A fire burned in the centre and the girl who had drawn us thither was in the act of pouring water into a vessel slung over it.

Seated on the ground was a young man and an old one. The latter jumped to his feet and strode menacingly forward. Unquestionably it was an awkward moment. The job of our patrol was to keep the peace, not to make trouble. I did not feel very pleased with myself for having walked into this. But what would you? Idle hours so rarely came our way.

The old chap was big, powerful, upright, his unkempt beard dyed in vivid patches of red—a peculiar custom of some nomadic tribes. His black eyes sparkled with ferocity. He raised a huge dirty fist. That, of course, left us cold. But on the little finger of that knotted hand there flashed a remarkable ring.

And over that, friend Bain grew quite warm. He had never seen a ring like it. It was a "curio" worth having. It was a ring of thick gold with the figure of some strange animal in black and white enamel on its face. It was not possible to see exactly what the quaint thing was. But we knew, in a general way, that these Arabic ornaments are valuable for their peculiar design.

In the head of the little figure were two tiny rubies for eyes, giving the thing a leer all its own, as if it were

some live insect clamped to the gnarled and begrimed finger.

Putting forth my best Arabic, I explained to the old man that we had missed our way and would rest a while before continuing to Ramadi. He was none too pleased to have us. Arabic hospitality, however, is not merely notorious, it is a law of all tribes. We were guests, however unwelcome, and no harm must befall the guest of a true Arabian.

The old man bade us be seated, gave an order for coffee to be served, then disappeared with his son into a nearby tent. A number of women came on the scene. We seemed to have disturbed a little family gathering.

Then a surprising thing happened. The girl who had lured us thither came and sat down between us, and began to talk in astonishingly good English. It was the last place in the world where we should have expected to hear it. Bain and I stared at each other. We wondered whether to acknowledge this strange lingo, whether indeed we had very stupidly fallen into a trap. I stared at the girl. She was not an Arabian. She had neither the features nor the colouring of one. She was pale, like an Assyrian, a Turk or maybe an Armenian.

She smiled. "I heard you speaking English one to the other. You are not natives. You only dress like them."

"Waal, can you beat it?" grinned Bain.

"Where did you learn English?" I queried.

"I learn from the English soldiers when the big war was here. I was a child then . . . one of many thousands . . . refugees with the soldiers at Bakubah."

I looked at Bain. This was decidedly his pigeon. I recalled that he had worked with those refugees at Bakubah in those faraway days of the Great War. But for some reason he gave no sign, save for an almost imperceptible lift of the eyebrows. Perhaps he was wise. One could never tell. Strange things happen in the regions of the Baghdad-Aleppo Road.

"You must go soon," said she. "The Khan does not like your presence. He says he knows not your tribe. . . ."

My rotten Arabic, I suppose. This was decidedly intriguing.

"And if he thought you were English. . . ."

"Yeah. An' what would he do, lil' girl?"

"You say 'lil' girl' just like the missionaries at Bakubah," she smiled, mimicking his tongue.

"The Khan is wearing a fine ring," pursued the imperturbable Bain. "Ja think he'd sell it?"

"Not for many thousands of rupees."

"Nope! That's too bad!"

"It means as much to him as the crown to your king. He took it one time from the hand of a big English Sidi."

"Since when he's used no other. . . . What's your name, kid?"

"When I was a child the American missionaries called me Lil Wan."

"Which means 'little one' in the American tongue, Bain!"

"Yep, Digger. I guess you're right."

Bain held up the date wisp.

"Say! Why did you . . .?"

"I wanted so much to hear the English speak.

When I hear you speak English one to the other . . .
Gorblimey! I want to speak English, too!"

"Hey! You didn't hear the American missionaries say Gorblimey!"

"No. Only English soldiers say Gorblimey."

Bain grinned. "One to me, Digger!"

"You will go before the sun is set," pleaded the girl.

"Sure! Don't worry, sister. Say! Wouldn't anything make the Khan give up that ring?"

"I do not say that. There are ways."

She stared with half-veiled eyes at the tent into which the Khan had disappeared.

"Waal?"

The girl looked into the glowing embers of the fire and began to whisper.

"Over there, in the tent where the Khan has gone, lies his youngest daughter. For three days she has sickened with fever. We stay here until the Arab doctor comes."

"I get you, sister. An' if we cured the Khan's daughter of the fever—would he give us that ring?"

"It may be."

"And if we did not cure the fever," said I.

"He would kill you first and strike camp afterwards."

"Yeah! That big hunka tripe! That's too bad!"

Bain turned to me and asked if I carried any quinine or aspirin. I possessed both, it being my habit never to move far without the little tablets, especially in the East. But I thought the joke had gone far enough. I felt some responsibility towards the patrol, even if Bain did not.

"Heavens, man! What use are they in a case of this sort? The old Khan doesn't believe in such methods

of curing fevers. He prefers his native witchcraft. No, Bain. You won't get the ring that way. . . ."

"Hey! Who's a dumb yokel? Am I thinking we can exchange a few tablets for a ring like that? Ain't there anything in my head besides hair-roots? Witchcraft? Surest thing you know, Digger. You ever heard of the Ku-Klux-Klan? It began in my hometown! I want those tablets, an' I'll use witchcraft."

I handed them over and we went to the tent of the Khan, Lil Wan, very mystified, following us. At the sound of our approach the old man came from his abode. I explained what we had heard about his daughter, that we were of a tribe who dwelt in the south within the shadow of Mecca itself, and we had special knowledge of fevers. In exchange for the ring he was wearing we would cure his daughter.

It required a great deal of tact and many flowery references to his family to prove that we were in earnest, and that we had the powers of which we had boasted. Once convinced, however, he called to the youth, his son, who lay within the door of the tent, and the two held a long confab.

At last we entered the tent where the sick girl lay. I had the feeling that we were a pair of prize fools and that this stunt would end disastrously. But having gone so far I found it difficult to back out. Bain appeared to have some plan of his own all cut and dried, and I certainly could not leave him to work out his own salvation alone. I was committed. That was all there was to it. After all, I had had some experience of this ex-legionnaire pal, and I knew he was no fool.

The sun was setting by this time. The interior of the crude tent was lit by four lamps each composed of a

small tray of fat with a piece of fibre for a wick. The light was not by any means brilliant. Bain was soon busy crushing tablets in a bowl, which he filled with water.

"This is where we make it snappy, Digger. It's the cool of the evening and the best time for reducing a temperature, I guess."

Still, I was in the dark. It was right over my head. I could see *why* the self-styled witch doctor was going through with this affair. He wanted to kid the Khan that we were really members of a southern Arabian tribe who, through the goodness of Allah, were endowed with supernatural powers for the curing of fevers. In itself, quite an interesting study in Arabian psychology. But it didn't lessen my uneasiness any. Also, friend Bain wanted that ring, it seemed.

While these preparations were in hand the old Khan and his son were watching with something like awe in their eyes. They were, in fact, poppy-eyed when Bain shoved the strange glass instrument into the girl's mouth. The clinic registered 104.

"Guess that won't be difficult to reduce."

Meanwhile, Lil Wan, following the magician's instructions, had procured a palm leaf and was using it effectively as a fan over the head of the patient. A wet band had already been placed over the girl's forehead. Bain got to his feet and whispered to me:

"Ask the old wallah as a sign of faith to hand the ring to his son, who will hold it until he is satisfied that we have driven the fever from her."

I gave the message. The ring was handed over. But there followed a muttered colloquy between father and son, which instantly aroused my suspicions. The

Khan was actually instructing his son to hang on to the ring like grim death, since he had no intention of parting with it!

That rather staggered us. Not that Bain gave any sign. Instead, he began the most ludicrous performance. Witchcraft, he called it! I had the greatest difficulty in keeping a straight face. Friend Bain was marching round the patient with his head bent and his arms outstretched before him, chanting in low, hoarse, mournful tones:

“There ain’t nobody to hear my song,
So I’m singing to myself!”

It was apparently all he knew of that fatuous refrain, so he repeated it and repeated it monotonously. Round and round he went, mouthing the silly lines. Imagine the scene! The rude tent of camel’s-hair cloth lit only by four feeble glimmers, Lil Wan industriously working the palm leaf, the two Arabs and I squat on our haunches, studies in facial expression, and Bain, serious as a judge, trudging around like some pantomime genii in his *burnous*, supplicating, mouthing his idiotic dirge:

“There ain’t nobody to hear my song,
So I’m singing to myself!”

At intervals Lil Wan was instructed to pour more medicine into the fever-stricken girl. The chanting went on. Bain was tireless. Inwardly he was having the time of his life. He began punctuating his chant with such mutterings as!

“Guess I’m sweatin’! Dancing around like a flea in a hen-coop! And the dirty old runt ain’t goin’ to give us the ring, huh? Waal, that’s just too bad!

"There ain't nobody to hear my song,
So I'm singing to myself!"

And more punctuation.

"The hairy-chested old goof! Boob! Gink! Sap! I hope he'll fall through his underwear an' hang himself. . . .

"There ain't nobody . . ."

And so on and so forth—until he suddenly halted his perambulations.

"Say! Listen, Digger! We gotta snap out o' this! Keep your peepers skinned. Guess there'll be a dirty rush in a minute!"

The patient sat up, obviously refreshed, her temperature normal. The Khan came forward and spoke to her. Lil Wan informed us she was saying how well she felt.

"Is the Khan satisfied?"

The reply came in the affirmative. Clearly he was delighted with this American magic. Whereupon Bain turned to the son for his reward, and was just in time to see that fellow sneaking through the door. With a whoop, Bain was across the tent and out after him. There being nothing else to do, I followed. The girls were screaming and running about the clearing. Then came an unearthly roar, like that of a bull in pain. His Highness, the Khan, on the warpath.

I had eyes only for Bain. He was racing across the clearing in the wake of the young Arab. They disappeared into the palm grove. Something flew past my ear. I turned, faced the coloured beard, and lunged. The Khan was a tough old warrior. We went down together.

As I have said, it was the very father and mother of a scrap. I managed to get entangled in my own *burnous*. The old wallah was astonishingly strong. I was panting and sweating in my efforts to hold back his wrist and knock out the knife. For a few crazy minutes I had a rather anxious time. I was harassed by the screaming women who danced around and tried to butt in. And suddenly I had crashed a fist against the thick skull. The knife fell. I clutched at it and got to my feet. The old man lay prone, out for the count.

I am not clear as to what happened then. I remember glaring at the women dancing around me, waving my arm, shoving them off. . . . I took to my heels. I admit it. I ran away. I can face men, done it hundreds of times, but women are a different proposition. If these yelling Amazons had got the faintest inkling that I was a *Roumi* (white man), there would have been a more concerted rush, a display of knives, a little more mutilation. So I ran away!

I ran blindly into the palm grove. It was as black as the pit. I could not see nor hear a thing. Where was that silly fellow, Bain? I should look several sorts of fool if I went back to the patrol camp without him. What had become of Lil Wan? She had not been among those crazy women, that I knew. They were Bedouins. What had she been doing in this galley? Had she followed Bain.

I wandered about that palm grove like a lost soul for the better part of an hour. When at last I came to the fringe, the moon was up, shedding its weird radiance over a silent plain of sand. Grunts nearby. And there was Bain, kneeling on the young Arab

while he tore the kid's clothes off his back and searched them for that ludicrous trifle of a ring.

"Gosh! The dirty gob has planted it somewhere!"

We searched the fellow with the greatest thoroughness, combed his hair, probed under his tongue, even in his ears—they were big enough!—completely undressed him; but never a ring did we find!

"Dropped it or swallowed it, darn him!"

"In either case, it's lost!"

"Yep! Come on, let's go."

We went, leaving the youth to dress himself. Bain's witchcraft had come to naught. We trudged back to camp, silently, wondering whether we looked the big fools we felt. We arrived somewhere around midnight, and got another shock. We found Skipper Armstrong, Gypso, Tass, the German, Pirando, a Spanish member, a number of the Cossacks, and even Tsamorsui, a Japanese who had lately found his way into the patrol—all standing about an Arabian girl who was chattering in comical English and occasionally punctuating her lingo with that weird expression, "Gorblimey!"

We joined the throng in as casual a manner as we could muster. It would, we felt, be interesting to hear what Lil Wan had to say. We stopped, looked and listened. I doubt whether anybody beyond the Skipper, Bain and I could understand what the girl was driving at. She seemed to be telling Armstrong her life history—from the time she was in the care of the English soldiers at Bakubah, Gorblimey, up to the moment when the American missionary in a *burnous* had cured a sick girl of fever.

She had known what would happen. She saw the ring dropped on the edge of that clearing. She had

clutched it with her toes and had followed the American missionary in the *burnous*, who was following the son of the Khan. . . .

"Yeah," commented Bain, "and then you lost both missionaries!"

The girl swung round and squeaked "Oh!"

Skipper Armstrong, seeing daylight, grinned—which was a change for him.

"This woman says she has something belonging to you, Bain."

"When I was with the soldiers, Gorblimey, they told me a promise was swearing by Allah. You did what you promise. It is your ring. Take it!"

She suddenly thrust the trinket into Bain's hand. He held it between finger and thumb and stared. We all crowded round and stared. Then somebody laughed. The laugh broke into a roar of merriment, while Bain continued to stare at the ring, at the quaint little figure in black and white enamel with the two tiny rubies for eyes.

"Michael Maus!" bellowed Tass, the German.

"Miguel Ratonocito!" laughed Pirando.

"Miki Kuchi!" echoed Tsamorsui.

"Mickey Mouse!" gasped Bain. "Gee! Can you beat that, huh!"

CHAPTER IX

INVITATION TO PARADISE

I HAD not thought to hear ever again of that beautiful witch, Olga Radnowitz, the alluring and fascinating she-devil into whose stronghold I had once unwittingly walked, and who, when Skipper Armstrong and the patrol made their raid, had somehow managed to escape.

Nearly two years had passed since the Baghdad incident. I was made aware of her continued existence in the most extraordinary manner. I awoke one morning to find a poisoned dagger stuck in my pillow, and attached to it a note written in French. This occurred while we were camped in the mountainous district several miles north of Ana, about midway between Aleppo and Baghdad, and well off the beaten track.

Translated, the note took the form of a very disturbing if somewhat theatrical query:

“Will you join me in Paradise or would you prefer that this poniard be plunged into your belly? Olga Radnowitz.”

“Waal, old Digger, it looks as if you’d gotta go to Paradise in either case, huh?” commented Bain.

The Skipper picked up the dagger and the note. He said nothing. His face was a mask. Gyppo was inclined to treat the whole matter as a joke. He would! He even offered a price for the knife. It was Tsamorsui, the Jap, who pointed to the curious stain on my pillow and to a similar stain on the dagger.

"Poison," said the Oriental succinctly.

"An unpleasant thing to have in one's belly," quoth I. "But what does she mean by joining her in Paradise?"

"Yeah. Where'n hell is Paradise? I guess it ain't in this benighted country."

"But, why not?" queried the Jap, in his precise and careful English. "Is not your Garden of Eden in Irak?"

"Waal? What the heck has that to do with Paradise?"

"Is it not the same thing? Was not your Garden of Eden the Garden of Paradise?"

"Aw, gee, Sammersee, don't start one of your theological arguments, for the love of Mike!"

The long lean Jap looked pained. His sparse beard and long straggling moustaches seemed to quiver for an instant. He never could make up his mind as to whether the American was laughing at him or not.

"I don't think the word Paradise was intended to be taken literally," I suggested. "It probably has some other meaning."

"I guess there ain't no sich place."

"Perhaps the lady meant it in the poetic sense," opined Tsamorsui solemnly.

"She's got a hunch for you," grinned Gyppo.

"Then I wish she'd show it in a less bloodthirsty fashion!"

"The important thing that concerns us," said the Skipper, still staring at the poniard in his hand, "is just how the person who stuck this in your pillow managed to get by the guards and out again. That, it seems to me, was devilish clever. I have questioned the guards. They know nothing. They neither heard nor saw anything unusual. There were six of them on duty and everyone thoroughly reliable. From the

point of view of prestige, the reputation of the Fourteenth Irak Desert Patrol, this is by way of being a nasty blow! Frankly, I don't like it."

We looked at each other and agreed. It happened that our guards of the night before had all been Cossacks, none of them new to the patrol, and everyone a reliable fellow, as Armstrong had said. How then had the person managed to steal into the camp, drive the dagger in the pillow without waking me (I am a fairly light sleeper), and get away again? I confess to having felt a trifle creepy about the whole business. I am not noticeably superstitious, nor particularly sensitive; but as I looked at Armstrong I realised just what he was thinking.

If a dagger could be shoved so easily into my pillow while I slept, then it would be equally simple to shove one in my chest, or the chest of any other of the mob for that matter. In short, we were none of us safe in our own camp, despite a wide-awake and watchful guard. A nice situation indeed for Skipper Armstrong and his famous patrol. Where, in point of fact, was our vaunted reputation now?

We discussed the situation for hours, examined the guards, conned over and over every tiniest detail, and gained not the slightest satisfaction. The whole incident was a complete mystery.

I, too, had become the mystery man of the patrol. Not one of the gang had met the alluring Olga. I was the only fellow who knew anything about her at all. It was therefore felt that out of my knowledge of the witch I should be able to throw some little light on to this mystery. Unreasonable, perhaps; but then I had met her and they had not.

"I wonder what it feels like to be chased by a dame!" grinned Bain.

"Not in the least flattering," said I.

"She seems to have made up her mind about you, Digger," said Armstrong. "Didn't she admit to having watched you a long time before the Baghdad incident?"

I nodded. "Seems to have taken a fancy to me. God knows why!"

"The lady is very tenacious," proclaimed Tsamorsui.

"Gosh! Ain't you a marvel at deduction, Sammersee!"

War between Japan and America appeared imminent—until the Skipper took up the discussion again.

"Well, she knows you couldn't answer such a message, not having her address, and wouldn't if you could. It's clear then that she'll attempt further contact. . . . Until I give you permission, Digger, don't move from the patrol at any time without an escort. Meanwhile, we'll double the guards."

It was equivalent to being under open arrest. And that made me feel about three feet high. I resolved that the lovely Olga should not escape next time. I went through the days with a saw-edge of a temper. I felt that if I were not very careful I should become the butt of the patrol. There were some among the gang who believed they could guess at my relations with the handsome Jezebel, since many were not without experiences, many who could say, and did, that the true cause of their nomadic lives was woman.

A piquant situation for me, and it endured for weeks, during which time nothing further happened. I rolled into the old bedbag each night with the feeling that

maybe there would be a message on my pillow in the morning. As the days went by it became the joke of the patrol—"Any skewered messages to-day?" And even the friendly Wahabis would grin and playfully gesture with their knives.

As the weeks went by things gradually became normal, that is, we spent our time rounding up a few thieves and cut-throats in the hills. Then Olga made another sign. She was an artist in that subtle matter of suspense. She believed in keeping her victim on tenterhooks. But in my case she nearly overstepped herself, for we were beginning to forget her when she struck again.

This time I said nothing to the boys about her message. I had had quite enough of their "love-and-a-stiletto" wisecracks. I was determined to get even with Madame Olga in my own way. A lone hand for me.

Her second message was enclosed in a thickly scented envelope—a scent that brought memories vividly to my mind. But it was not skewered this time.

It was a *billet d'amour*! It might have been the message of a love-sick girl to her beau. It was almost comic—coming from such a character as Madame Radnowitz. She had love on the brain. She had been planning for two years. It had taken her that time to get initiated into the society of the Assassins.

For the rest, her scented epistle was full of apologies for the theatricality of her previous letter, for having tried to obtain an effect of cheap drama by means of a poisoned poniard. *I must prepare for my journey to Paradise!*

In one breath she was quoting—"Omnia vincit amor, nos et cedamus amori," and in the next she was being

as cheaply theatrical with her talk of Assassins as she was with her dagger in the previous effort. Mad.

Of course, I knew the history of the Assassins. Who does not? They had existed in Arabia since the days of the Crusades. There have been evidences of their work within recent times, chiefly in the swift and mysterious disappearances of beautiful native girls. Somewhere in this vast Arabia they had their secret stronghold.

The patrols had never come into touch with any of their activities. Foolishly, perhaps, I decided they should not do so now. I did not believe I could be spirited away in a night—as if I were some desirable and beautiful virgin!

I was wrong. I can frankly say I went to bed that night quite easy in mind. My sleep was untroubled. It was the waking to life again that was troublesome.

I opened my eyes to gaze upon a sea of flowers. I sat up, dazed, bewildered. This was not a dream. It was real. A great expanse of colour, a riot of scent, a world of blossoming flowers. I rubbed my eyes and stared. God! How I stared. The ground sloped away from my feet down to a defile cut by a stream. About the high walls of the valley were grassy slopes, cliffs forested with fir, spruces, giant rhododendrons, red, yellow and blue poppies.

It seemed as if I gazed at that brilliant world of colour for hours—a timeless period. Paradise indeed!

How had I been brought here, to this gigantic garden on top of the world? Where exactly was I? I had not been knocked out. I was not conscious of any sort of pain. Drugged, of course. So this was Olga's work. She meant all that about her initiation into the society

of the Assassins. Assassins. Hashhashin. Drugged, of course, and carried hither. *Hashhashin*. The juice of the leaves of hemp. Very neat.

I sat on a mountain top—heaven knows how many thousand feet up. (In that case, I must have been drugged for days?) I could sense the elevation by the mist-shrouded craggy summits of other mountains stretching away to the distance. I reasoned that it must have taken days to convey me to this spot. Where was I? In the Lebanon or further eastward among the Persian hills? So many tales were told as to the whereabouts of the Assassins' fastness. Well, I was in it.

It was a lovely pleasance. It was a beautiful valley high up in the mountains. It was undoubtedly the retreat of the Assassins. Every corner of this amazing elysium confirmed all that I had heard and read about it—save that there were no beautiful damsels in my view nor any of those conduits conducting streams of wine and milk and honey through the garden. Otherwise, it was an astonishingly beautiful attempt to create heaven on earth.

At my feet the ground was covered with dry grass rolling like waves in a gentle breeze. Behind me, beyond the rising garden, dazzling white towers and roof-tops glistened in the sun against a background of almost black cypress trees.

By the position of the sun, I judged it was still early morning. The air was beautifully crisp and clear. Perhaps it was up there where they kept the lovely maidens.

Then she came, strolling through the garden, laughing softly, waving a greeting. Olga Radnowitz had grown more beautiful with the passing of two years. Maybe

it was the setting. She sank gracefully beside me on the soft turf, this handsome, black-haired woman with the tragic, classic Hebrew features and the great magnetic eyes that could laugh and dance. She took my breath away just then.

"It is certainly a very beautiful prison," said I.

"Not prison, *mon cheri*. Paradise. Our home."

"Our home?"

"But, yes."

Olga was the most alluring thing in skirts I've ever known. Perhaps, had we met in different circumstances, I might have told a different tale. Who shall say!

But she was not in skirts now. She was garbed in keeping with her surroundings. She was an artist. She wore a robe of impeccable white silk adjusted in the manner of an Indian girl's *sari*; but on her statuesque figure it had all the grace and beauty of the robe of a Greek Goddess. Her legs below the oblique hem were bare, honey-coloured and shapely. She wore sandals of soft cream-coloured leather.

A lovely creature, lithe, sinuous, having the power to make one conscious of the animal.

She talked in terms of love. As becomes a modest fellow writing in the first person, I find it impossible to set down much that she said. That she should have taken two years to get into the inner councils of the Assassins, and with the sole intention to enlist their aid in drugging and conveying me to this retreat, should be sufficient indication of her state where I was concerned.

She seemed to have made this her life's ambition. She had succeeded. There was nothing I could do. I had the freedom of the valley, for she believed I

should never find the way out and down these several thousand feet to the world below.

She talked in low intimate tones, a silky huskiness in her voice and an unmistakable light in her eyes. I was conscious again of that strange hypnotic influence, conscious of the necessity to fight hard against it.

In the days that followed I discovered that there were no Assassins in this secret fastness. In that palatial house that lay under a shelf of rock there were none but Madame Olga's own staff. Whether she had engaged Assassins to convey me thither, I never learned. Whether the place had ever been the stronghold of that strange sect I could not say. I only knew that the poisoned dagger and the drugs associated with that weird sect were the theatrical properties used to convey the impression.

At all events, I hoped that one Armstrong would get that impression—and fly high enough.

I had to face the plain, unvarnished fact. I had been kidnapped. And by a mad woman! Centuries ago the retreat may have been the home of the Assassins. But during my sojourn it was just a beautiful garden and a grand castle stuck high up in the mountains.

That great cleft in which I lived for many days towered 15,000 feet up! I learned there was some truth in the saying that the higher you climb the lower you sink!

At that altitude the air was crisp, sharp on the tongue, like champagne. It made me feel supremely fit. I would walk into that beautiful garden of an early morning to watch the sun rise like a gigantic ball of red fire. There was something about that rarefied air. I wanted to perform idiotic feats of strength—tear up trees by the roots.

Olga, of course, exhibited her supreme vitality in other ways. No wonder she was mad. But what a madness! I realised very early in my stay that I should have to keep a firm grip on myself. It would be so easy to give way to this mountain madness. Sometimes I wondered how long I could stick—before I went sick or insane.

Add to this the daily association with a she-devil like Olga!

She lived in a world of her own making, a morally unchartered world. If she had been really sane she would have known that one cannot do that—indefinitely.

Yet she was terribly anxious about my welfare. My every wish—except the one big wish!—was law. I need but raise my hand and she would have signalled one of her many serving men to throw himself over the giant crags for our amusement. As most of them were tainted with the same madness, suicide would have ensued.

Sincerity is nothing in itself. A mad woman can be frightfully sincere. I caught a glimpse of her in my bedroom one morning. She was kissing the hollowed impression my head had made in the pillow. And sometimes she could be appealingly childlike. She had a mania for colour. As when she took my hand and dragged me to a bunch of rocks by the garden pool. There was a three-foot snake there, curious metallic blue in colour, lying in a crevice of the yellow sandstone. She called it her barbaric jewel. It struck me as a good description of the lady herself in that setting. Sweet madness. But I was conscious all the time that we couldn't play for ever, having a genius for recognising the obvious. But she could never see it that way. She was as content as a child with a bag of lollipops.

Never a day passed but I planned. I was in a jam. Perhaps it was the biggest I had ever been in. But even then I was not without hope.

I thoroughly explored the valley, sometimes alone, other times in the company of Olga. As the curious days passed she seemed to have the impression that I was as content with my lot as the rest of her insane bunch.

But I could not find the way out. There wasn't one—except a precipitous slither down sheer rock face, which must have meant certain death.

True, there was the stream. I had followed its course very early in my stay. It ended in a gigantic waterfall that tumbled over rocks with a drop of fifty feet.

The one query Olga would never answer was how we had all reached that retreat. How had I been conveyed thither? On that subject she could talk a lot of hokem about the Assassins and their incredible feats under the influence of the hemp leaf.

All of which conveyed precisely nothing to me. That explanation might have served in the days of Saladin. In my twentieth-century view it didn't hold water. There was a secret inlet somewhere, but, try as I would, I could not locate it.

Aeroplanes? I could have been delivered thus. But I dismissed the idea as being too far-fetched for such a crowd as Olga employed. Nevertheless, I began to look skywards. It occurred to me that my manner of disappearing might impress someone in the patrol as the work of Assassins. In which event it was possible they would enlist the Irak Air Scouts to search the mountain regions.

And that might take months. Meanwhile, heaven alone knew what would happen to me in these crazy regions. I might become as top-heavy as the beautiful Olga herself.

Then it came. Deliverance. There was an unforgettable afternoon of glorious sunshine, crisp air and perfect peace. I lay on the greensward half-hidden by a clump of stunted palms, gazing lazily at the tumbling water of the stream a few feet below. It was the hour of Olga's siesta.

What instinct caused me to lift my head and look back towards the forest of firs away up on the hillside, I do not know. But having done so, I stared in idle curiosity at the antics of a native. The craziness of these people never ceased to interest me. I could watch unobserved. The fellow was crouching in the shadow of the trees that skirted the rise of ground leading to the castle. His hand clutched the bridle of a diminutive donkey.

The astonishing thing about those two asses was that they were drenched, soaked, dripping with water. They could not have fallen into the stream because I was between them and the water and must have seen them do it. Maybe they had both stumbled into some pool in that plantation—though I could not recollect having seen one there.

Here indeed was a first-class mystery for my idle moments. And why, apart from his natural craziness, was he crouching there like that? He appeared to be searching the open green space to make sure there was no one about. He emerged at last, dragging the dripping, pack-laden donkey after him, crossed hurriedly and entered the courtyard.

I lay thinking for several long moments. There was but one thing to do. I must make a more thorough search of that plantation. I thought I knew every inch of it, knew there was not a thimbleful of water in it anywhere! Clearly there was a mystery behind that belt of trees.

I made my way thither. I started at the top and descended in a systematic survey, crossing and recrossing the belt until I was tired. Then, where the trees ended and the rocks rose up, I came upon a thin stream. There was scarcely sufficient water in the gulley to wet my feet, let alone drench a man from head to foot. I followed the course, knew I was descending in a direction I had never taken before.

I was aware of the passing of time, of the possibility of being missed when Olga rose from her couch. I became desperate, feverishly so. It must have been two hours since I left the river bank, and as I stumbled and crashed among the stones of the gulley I was conscious that the sun was losing some of its power. Perhaps, already, they were searching for me. I hurried on.

The gulley ended in a tunnel through which the stream ran. As I reached it I could hear the rush of heavy water. The tunnel was hung with all manner of twisted growth, but I managed to make my way through. Then I pulled up short. A river was streaming along overhead.

I was standing behind a broad sheet of water which was falling from the rocks above! I had seen this fall of water from the top of those rocks. Now I was under it and behind it. Clearly one could walk through this sheet of falling water without mishap—save that of

a good dousing. If a crazy native and his pack-laden donkey could do it, so could I.

I inhaled deeply and took the plunge. It was all over in a few seconds. Spluttering and gasping, I found myself on a shelf of rock with the gushing water careering crazily about my legs.

But I need not have worried. Here was no swift descent. Before me was a broken bed of rock-strewn pools. I clambered over the slippery piles and reached the bank.

There I found a tiny track running down the mountain-side. The dim world of desert lay thousands of feet below, reddened now by the setting sun. I could never reach the world down there before nightfall, but I did not hesitate. I took the path at the double. Below lay freedom. And that was all I cared about!

CHAPTER X

ON THE SHELF

"THE devil take the woman!" said I, realising that I had freed myself from her silken clutch, from her sensual and slothful mode of life—only to fall into another and perchance more hopeless *impasse*.

I was sitting on a shelf of rock high up on the mountain-side—rather disconsolately, it must be confessed. Melting away beneath me were rolling hills, pleated valleys, and beyond them a wide stretch of grey desert.

This was early morning of my second day of freedom. God in heaven! What an escape! I had stumbled in the semi-darkness and had been precipitated headlong—hurtling like a stone from a catapult down the slope of a couple of a hundred feet of slippery turf, and had come to rest on this impossible ledge of rock.

The natural stone platform was about fifty yards long and twenty in width. Above and behind me was what looked like an impossible climb to the peak, sheer, tufted between rock-piles with wiry turf, which I knew was as treacherous as a glacier at that incline.

Looking over the edge of the rock, I could see a drop of fifty feet on to sharp crags. At best I could not hope to escape a broken limb or two. Nothing for it but to find the road back by way of that grassy slope.

Beyond peeling my arms, I had reached the shelf without mishap. It was, in fact, a very lucky stumble.

Also, I was amazingly hungry; after my sumptuous fare in the abode of one Olga Radnowitz, up there on the roof of the world, these two days of escape had proved a sore trial. Sweet roots, dates, and brackish water hardly formed a sustaining diet.

I decided to make an effort up the wire grass. It came away in handfuls as I slithered and slipped up the sheer face of it. A dozen times I flopped back to the ledge, breathless, exhausted, hands torn and bleeding, the sweat pouring down in streams. By the time I had made my umpteenth attempt in late afternoon that grassy patch looked as if some hungry beast had been gnawing at it.

There was not a sign of life anywhere. How often did Olga's donkey-man make his trips to market? I had supposed he was the ration wallah for that little community up there. During my two days wandering, however, I had not come upon a soul. The world was horribly bleak and desolate and lifeless.

This game of sitting on a rock and looking down upon the world was getting on my nerves. After the weird experiences of the past couple of weeks it was hardly the sort of life to help one towards mental equilibrium. If only I had possessed the philosophy of an Indian seer who could sit for hours contemplating his navel.

Resting after my strenuous efforts, I tried all manner of Yoga tricks with my breathing. The phase endured for quite a while. I had some vague idea that by correct breathing I should amass sufficient strength to claw my way out of this predicament. There were times when I almost persuaded myself into succeeding. Maybe I was just a bit light-headed. But, even breathing

can become a source of terror when you have been stuck up on a mountain-side for a couple of days and are facing another black night.

Mingled with my breathing exercises were thoughts of Olga. Which was all wrong. I was so weak at times that I wished I'd stayed with her. Why was I such a dissatisfied animal? There was everything up there that man could need. Everything. Even beauty. Beauty animate and inanimate. I could not really decide whether I were mad up there, or just mad down here. I must have been mad to leave all that merely to sit on this rock and gaze at the world like some outcast devilkin.

From where I was perched I could not see any sign of the donkey track. I had been thrown right out of it. It was as if I had been thrown right out of the world into some sphere where life was hopeless, impossible. There were no sounds here, no sounds of life, only the incessant rustle of wind along wire grass and stunted scrub, and sometimes that fell to a brooding quietude. Then I fancied I could hear my own breathing, knew that the intakes and the expulsions were incorrect for this mountain atmosphere!

I tried directing my thoughts into other channels. But the subterfuge sufficed only for a little while. There was nothing there to distract my thoughts, nothing save those everlasting hills and valleys and that damnable brassy sky. There was not even a bird.

Then darkness came. I pondered far into the night. Before falling asleep I decided that in the morning I would risk a jump from the rock ledge. Anything would be better than this crouching madness of the stone platform.

I awoke with the glare of the red ball in my eyes, feeling considerably refreshed and hungrier than ever. Well, what was it to be? Over the edge with the best of luck? I crawled to the edge, lying flat on my stomach, and peered down. It looked like suicide to me. But which was worse—stark raving madness on this ledge, or crashing my brains out down there? There was always the million-to-one chance that I should escape death in the leap.

Just the same, I could at least make another attempt upward before taking the perilous one down over the ledge. I must get out of this bit of landscape without further delay.

My hands were pretty raw by this time. I tried grasping sharp pebbles in them and dug hard with my toes as well. I had taken a lot of the smoothness out of that slope the day before, and at first it looked as if I would succeed. And then, just as I was within inches of grabbing at a stunted bush to pull myself to safety, away I slithered, careering crazily down to that damnable ledge once more!

I sat there in a cloud of rubble and dust and dirt and wondered why Fate had staged me for this ironic display of man's impotence and ineptitude!

Getting out of Olga's retreat had been child's play . . . compared to this! Then another thought assailed me. The longer I stayed here the more likelihood there would be of her minions coming upon me. And then—what?

I supposed they had made some sort of search for me. Though there was nothing certain about that. Olga was not the sort of person to begin an agitated search as soon as my disappearance was noted. She

believed in biding her time, going her own inscrutable way about these things. It was an interesting speculation—wondering what she had been doing these past two days.

I am not pretending that my thoughts during this strange experience were altogether in line with sanity. I merely record them—straight from my diary.

There were many speculations as the slow hours passed. And suddenly, unaccountably, I would start to shiver. Yes, in that blazing, torrid heat. There were periods when I was filled with an unnameable fear. . . .

While I rested from my crazy exertions I tried to think of other things, other experiences, anything to get my mind away from the crushing weight of those damnable mountains. I thought of the bush, of the Great War—war! That only seemed to bring me to other mountains and another experience.

Memories can be strikingly vivid in the atmosphere of a mountain-top. I saw myself a year after the war had closed, making my way from Basrah to Bombay en route to London for demobilisation. But I was stopped at Bombay. How well I remembered it! There was trouble on the North-West Frontier and I found myself among the details joining a battalion for those regions.

And then Kohat, guarding the mouth of the Kohat Pass. Kohat and Isabel. Kohat, just one little outpost on the chain of defences along the North-West Frontier. It was a tightened-up little affair of granite, tiny bungalows, tiny side-walks, tiny beds of flowers, and round it all great grim walls of stone, beyond which were trenches and barbed wire.

Set in the midst of all that cold stone and grim armoury, like a tiny flower in a great rockery, was Isabel—just a thoroughbred daughter of a thoroughbred resident British officer come out to see Daddy “after the war.”

A typical Indian station. Once the wild tribes had been quelled, there were the usual rounds of social occasions, parties, dances, tennis, a military band in a moonlit square. There were bronzed soldiers fresh from battle, pretty girls in ravishing frocks. And Isabel.

Every morning one awoke to the vision of bleak mountains and silent valleys, where, it seemed, life could not exist. Here, from my shelf, also mountains, and no life at all.

A picture of Isabel in a frame of rock. Determined to crush it, I heaved myself once again upwards towards the roof of the green slope, hand over hand, digging in the loose earth with toes and claws, knowing now how treacherous was that tough-looking wire grass, how easily it broke beneath my weight. Up I went, breathlessly cautious as to hands and feet, a firm foothold, a steadying halt, then up again, gaining, gaining ground inch by inch, seeing more clearly my desired goal, until I was almost crazy with excitement. Then a sudden slither, a scramble, clutching wildly. . . .

Back again on my perch, the tears of anger and mortification in my dust-filled eyes, sitting there like a clown, the stupid plaything of those unsmiling peaks, breathing a cloud of dust and filth.

Only there was no audience, no one to laugh—at least, no one that I could see!

I am sure Isabel would have laughed. She would

have been tickled to death. There was just that quality of sardonic humour in the situation which would have appealed to that pretty little thing, that blonde doll with the mouth of a baby and the heart of a strumpet. How she would have laughed!

And how she had laughed on that other occasion, roared with merriment at my humiliation.

I suppose most men have shown a yellow streak at some time in their lives. It was my misfortune to exhibit it to the little girl I worshipped. And she laughed.

But why does it all come back now? This mountain air, maybe, another humiliating episode, an association of ideas engendered by a similarity of environment.

But there were no beaters here, no solemn-faced natives to stare as the Sahib jumped almost out of his skin at the sudden appearance of his first yellow cat, no amused Isabel to laugh when, by his unaccountable agony of indecision, the Sahib threatened to endanger the lives of the whole hunting party. . . . And to have that tiny yellow cat rush in, laughingly, firing again and again at the mark clearly his own . . . until the great-clawed striped thing lay panting on the ground.

How she had laughed. It was the talk of the cantonment for days. The sort of talk that followed one about, even to the London clubs, where members stared at one with that supercilious, distasteful air, as if one were a noisesome insect . . . welcome nowhere, save in the Foreign Legion. . . .

No, there was no one to laugh now. So it could not be so very bad, after all.

I reasoned that when I finally reached the pitch where solitude had become unendurable, I could always

take a header over the ledge. How long would that be? A week, two, three? Or was it only a matter of days?

I determined upon more efforts up that slide. It should not get me down. If I threw myself over the rocks it would not be because I had gone mad at my repeated attempts to climb up, but merely that I had become insane with unaccustomed solitude.

I remember I jumped up suddenly, savagely, took a flying leap at that crazy patch as though I would scale the whole mountain-side, let alone those comparatively few feet. And I came down again, bringing a ship-load of earth, mostly in my eyes and mouth, and stood there shaking my fist while I spat out the filth and cursed and cursed.

The world's prize idiot. There was nothing rational in me nor around me. Only cold grey immovable peaks that stared sullenly at my *danse macabre* performance. The Fourteenth Irak Patrol was a million miles away, and this was the end. What would Armstrong do in such circumstances? Or Bain—who went about sleepy-eyed for weeks and then suddenly awakened to the most astonishing activity? Or Gyppo, or Tass, the German, or slender Tsamorsui, or any of the Wahabis? They seemed to parade before my eyes, taunting, mocking.

Like those Afridis did when they tore up their clothes to rope the big yellow cat to the pole. . . . Merciful heavens!

It was typical of my state of mind at that time that I should be nearly three days thinking a way out of my predicament! I stood up then, quite coolly, and slipped off the enveloping *burnous*. It was thick, heavy

material, approaching a blanket in size and texture. I didn't even have a knife. I worked laboriously with sharp stones. I shouted for joy when after hours of hacking I had made the first strip.

Night fell before I had completed the third strip. But I slept happily, knowing that freedom was in sight. Dawn found me at work again with primitive implements of stone. I reckoned I could make forty feet of strips. Whether they would be tough enough or not I hardly paused to think. They would certainly hold my weight better than those tufts of wire grass. I had lengths of at least five feet each, and there would be eight of them, perhaps ten.

It became a terribly exciting game! I was working feverishly, against time. The sun climbed up, huge, splashing the sky with a riot of colour. I measured my progress with its climb to zenith, hoping earnestly that I would have the thing ready by high noon. That would give me ample time to get down and over and on my way.

What way? I had not the faintest idea. What did it matter so long as I could get clear of this damnable shelf. God knows, I'd been on the shelf long enough. It was the weirdest experience and one that would last me a lifetime . . . three whole days of the craziest behaviour a man had ever been committed to . . . and now!

I began to knot the strips of cloth, remembering an incident of my youth when a would-be rescuer had been killed while letting himself over a cliff on the end of a rope secured with "granny knots." I recalled the episode most vividly as I fumbled with the knots, more especially an old man who came drifting away

from the little group of excited people as I approached to inquire what was wrong.

I could see the face of that old timer. The would-be rescuer had been killed. He was no longer interested in the rescue. He was terribly indignant. He told me how he had protested when they knotted the ropes before the man was lowered. He told them that "granny knots" would never hold, and they told him not to be fussy when people were doing their best to rescue a helpless girl hanging half-way down the cliff by her teeth.

A weird old man he was, with spindley legs and concertina trousers, a brown face seamed and lined with age, but strangest of all the wide-brimmed hat he wore round the edge of which a string of bottle-corks hung, so that he had but to shake his head when the flies became too troublesome. . . . Truly, a bush character.

But my job was complete. I had forty or fifty feet of "rope" with which to let myself over the ledge to freedom. I peered over the lip of rock. The drop was no more than sixty. I secured one end of the rope to an angle of my stone platform and threw the other end over. It hung to within a few inconsiderable feet of a bunch of scrub. I confess to some excitement as I levered myself over the edge, looking neither up nor down but keeping my eyes on the cloth rope.

As I disappeared over the edge a shot rang out, echoing and re-echoing through that mountain stillness. I jumped as if shot, swung perilously, then steadied my grip as I slowly descended. Where in heaven's name had that shot come from? I could not tell, swinging there, whether it had come from above or

below. My fancy, fathered by the hope, insisted that it came from above, for I was then sheltered from that region by the overhanging ledge.

It was a matter of minutes before I felt the end of the rope in my hands. Then I looked down beneath my feet. It was an easy drop and I let go. When I opened my eyes another shot rang out. Lively, I thought. I sat crouched in the scrub and stared down the hillside. The shot had been appreciably nearer.

It was then that I picked out the donkey track. An Indian file of figures was ascending that track. I rubbed my eyes, hoping these crazy experiences and crazier fancies were not responsible for the picture of those moving men. But there was no doubt about the shots! Two of the figures were much in advance of the rest. I could see fairly clearly. Arabs with their *burnous* tucked in at the waist to leave their feet free in that treacherous track. They raised hands to shield long-sighted eyes, seeming to stare in my direction—at the rope dangling behind me.

I stood up and waited. There seemed no point in hiding. The two men saw me standing there. One immediately raised his gun and fired into the air. Good God! It's a patrol! Those two are the scouts! That was unquestionably the signal! A patrol. Could it be the Fourteenth? It was! And I had torn a good *burnous* into strips!

CHAPTER XI

RELIEF OF TEL KALA

I WELCOMED very eagerly the job that came to be known as the Relief of Tel Kala. After my release from that memorable shelf of rock there were many days of idleness. The boys of the Fourteenth Patrol filled in the restless hours with a great deal of banter and chaff regarding my adventure with the fascinating she-devil, Olga Radnowitz. The baiting went on for days and days. It was a damnably trying time, to say the least. It was not pleasant to be the butt of a lot of hardened wallahs like the Irak desert police.

The patrol, it transpired, had been searching among the hills for me for the better part of a fortnight. As soon as my disappearance had been noted, the Skipper had decided on the apparently hopeless task of trekking the mountains. They were on the point of giving up the search, until they could call in the aid of the air patrol, when I was sighted. Their first impression of me from the distance was of a man attempting to hang himself.

Then followed three days in and around the abode of that strange woman. I had been able to lead the patrol through the sheet of water that concealed the secret entrance. But we found the place completely deserted. There was not a sign of the bewitching mistress or any of her staff. Nor was there any indication of a hurried exit. The castle had been stripped of its

movable furnishings—which had consisted largely of divans, cushions and tapestries—the stables were empty, the stores and outbuildings cleared, so that they had the appearance of not having been used for years. Certainly Madame had gone about her task of quitting with great deliberation and thoroughness, determined not to leave any trace of her presence. The strange pleasance was as silent as the grave.

“It doesn’t look as if it had been inhabited in a hell of a time!” quoth Bain.

And that, unfortunately for my account, was the general impression! In the circumstances, my story of the beautiful adventuress and her large suite required a great deal of digesting! Not one of the patrol had ever seen the woman. This was the second time the witch had laid me by the heels. So it was not surprising that some of the bunch should begin to look at me rather queerly. Willy-nilly I was the mystery fellah!

However, there was no doubt about the retreat, its beautiful gardens, and the castle. All of the place was just as I had described it. No. It was not the setting. It was the woman in the story that earned for me such questionable notoriety. I came to loathe the very mention of her name!

Still, it all came to an abrupt full stop when we returned to headquarters, for there we found signs of much activity. We were given orders to proceed towards Tel Kala with all possible speed. The order had gone forth that we were to join other patrols and make of ourselves a sort of army in the field. Which was quite a new stunt for us, since, up to that time, we had always worked as an independent unit. We were no longer

desert police, but soldiers in action. There was a miniature war on.

"Tel Kala is in a state of siege," explained the Skipper, as we proceeded in camel caravan towards the scene of action. "There's an emergency landing station of the Cairo-Baghdad air route on that historic ground. It is well off our usual track, but on account of the seriousness of the situation all sorts of armed forces are being drafted there."

The landing ground was situated in the heart of country peopled by hostile tribes. The aerodrome itself had been built inside a fortified station to house and protect the air-mail travellers. The fort had then been in existence several years, but had never had to exercise its function as such before. It contained underground stores, food and petrol, and considerable valuable property. There had grown up around the station quite a colony of Arabs, who, having found the place immune from attack hitherto, had settled there to pursue their simple farming and peasant industries. Most of these, however, had joined the Kurds in their concentrated attack on the station!

Tel Kala was a mound of considerable extent and stood in the middle of a group of low hills that were sparsely covered with stunted palm, bush, camel-thorn and sheep grazing. The mound commanded a wide view of the surrounding hills. It was a difficult fort to approach, and one that would hold as long as the supply of water within should suffice the few inhabitants.

There were, however, a great many hiding-places among the adjacent hills and valleys, and some of the clefts were deep enough to accommodate a battalion. Our job was to help other contingents in clearing out



"THERE HAD GROWN UP AROUND THE STATION QUITE A COLONY OF ARABS" [Photo : Associated Press]

those nooks and crannies, where the hostile natives appeared to have bedded in for a long stay. The once-peaceful farmers and sheep herders thereabouts had become hostile too, and their stock and produce was being used to ration quite an army of Arabian and Kurdish cut-throats. These natives were intent upon plunder on the large scale. Altogether, it was quite a novel situation—except for the handful of men imprisoned in the fort!

We were loping along at a good speed towards the hills, perhaps four or five miles off, when a motor scout came into view. He handed a message to Armstrong and in a few moments was leading us up a stiff incline. At the top we came upon a great wide plateau. It was a cheery sight that met our gaze. All manner of desert police and regular troops had pitched camp. Dusk was descending then and we found a corner of our own and settled in. The Skipper went along to the G.O.C. for a consultation. He presently returned and informed us that all was set for a big drive over the countryside. The plan was to clear out the whole native tribes at one fell sweep, and in this each patrol and contingent had its own part allocated.

The signal for the attack would be given at dawn. Then there would be a simultaneous march forward from all over the hills towards the fort in the centre. In this way it was hoped to round up the enemy and break through to the station. Our camels had been handed over to the oont-wallahs. We were to advance over the treacherous hilly ground on foot. Every man of us in the Fourteenth looked forward to the skirmish with the liveliest anticipation. After our weeks of

idleness, nothing could have pleased us more than a first-rate scrap!

We had moved to our position a couple of hours before dawn and lay in the thick scrub awaiting the signal. Bain crouched within a yard of me, on the left flank. On the other side was Gyppo, nursing the butt of his brand new nickel-steel Mauser. Beyond him the long lean Jap, then a line of Wahabis and Cossacks, with Armstrong somewhere in their midst. Every man a-tiptoe with anticipation, itching fingers about trigger-guards. So, around this chain of hills, a long line of police and regulars was stretched out during the night.

That was the longest two hours I have experienced. I pictured the strange company of men hastily gathered together for this attack—the various nationalities in the patrols, the Iraki regulars and the British units, a motley throng indeed! This, I mused, would be one of those miniature wars that occur now and then in the more remote spots of Irak and which are dismissed with a few lines in the world's Press. Reticent folk, the British! Amazing how much history is made in such regions as this, and the world hears little or nothing of it!

A wisp of light appeared over the Eastern skyline. Dawn was a matter of minutes now. It would come up suddenly, a great splash of colour, and we should crash into it with a crackling of rifles and Mausers. . . . As the piercing whistle sounded my heart leapt to the lure of the charge, the blood quickened as with the stimulus of heady wine. I heard Bain's voice at my side. He was chuckling. We were stumbling down the mountain-side, over a series of precipitous cliffs, towards the flat plain of the valley. Loose stones and

boulders were crashing downwards, sent flying from the hundreds of stumbling, advancing feet, kicking up a terrific din.

Suddenly there was a raucous roaring and yelling. Some of the advance line had already engaged the rebels. The sounds of rifle volleys mingled with the hoarse cries of men came from my left flank. Then I was aware of stealthy figures advancing towards my own section. Rifles spat. We dropped for cover and gave them volley for volley.

What happened to the column after that we could only hazard a guess. We were far too busy attending to our own section of the line. Bullets were whistling all around us, and it was soon clear that we were up against a pretty big force of rebels. It was not, however, our intention to dig in, but to advance. The Skipper yelled to us to charge.

"C'm on! You dirty runts!" cried Bain, as we dashed straight into a bunch of Arabs.

Thereafter a general mix-up at close quarters, thrusting and lunging. Those rebels were a tough lot. They met us with knives and rifle-butts, yelling and screaming like maniacs. The harder and closer the tussle, the louder their shouts. They were telling us that Allah was with them and all was well. And they kept on telling us. It might have been laughable, if it hadn't been so deadly earnest.

I had a blurred vision of whirling knives, blood-stained faces, foaming mouths and fierce black eyes—all mixed up higgledy-piggledy. Then the man before me would give a grunt and sink. Instantly another took his place and the crazy sparring and lunging would begin all over again.

We were hand-to-hand fighting among great boulders and thick bunches of camel-thorn, stumbling here and there in a most disorderly sort of advance. The light was up and the surrounding country presented an amazing scene. We moved in inches, from one spot of cover to another. We stumbled over dead and wounded, whether our own or the rebels we could not stop to investigate. But we had the advantage of higher ground.

It looked at one moment as if we were to break the ranks of the rebels. But they were suddenly reinforced by another and bigger contingent of screaming, gesticulating figures. A hail of lead splashed amongst us, taking a number of our men. We had no option then but to drop down and take cover. The Skipper was yelling orders to stand fast and keep up the fire. We were, in short, in a damnably tight corner.

Suddenly the stammering rat-tat-tat of a machine-gun burst close to my ear. I swung my head around and saw from where I crouched that a couple of machine-gun crews had come to our aid. I lowered my gun and watched the machine-gunners spray the rebels with bullets at the rate of seventy to the minute. One after another the belts snaked through those stuttering guns, showering death among the rebel Kurds and Arabs and shattering all other sounds of battle.

The order was passed along that we should charge immediately the machine-guns ceased fire. But there was ample cover and those brown devils took a lot of routing. The patrol had ceased firing now, content to rest while the automatic guns did their damndest.

We watched the bullets spatter and flatten against the great chunks of rock strewn about this shelf of the mountain-side. Here and there a white-robed figure emerged, gun-levelled for a second, then threw up its hands and flopped into the dirt. It was like watching some crazy game of Aunt Sally. The foolhardy Kurds were trying to get the machine-gunners. But their sniping came to nothing. The automatic guns did not pause for a second. Belts were fed into them with astounding speed and precision. More and more ammunition was sent up. More and more belts snaked through the stuttering pieces.

Then the rebels suddenly rushed from cover—what was left of them—and were careering crazily down the hillside. The machine guns ceased as suddenly as they had begun. We jumped to our feet and charged after the rebels. Then began a mad race among the rubble and dirt and stones, the patrol firing from the hip as they staggered down the treacherous slope. Bain, I saw out of the corner of my eye, was still alongside, like myself, unhurt. I could hear Armstrong's voice. Apparently he was still going strong! But of Gyppo there was no sign. I wondered as I ran whether the little fellow had stopped one, and if. . . . But what was the good of surmising? He'd turn up again, I assured myself.

Arabian bandits are wileful rascals. This bunch had no intention of running away, in spite of their great losses. In any case, they realised then that there was nowhere to run—except into another of our detachments where others of their crowd were already engaged; and that would avail them nothing. They were surrounded over a wide area and they knew it.

Clearly, it was their intention to fight to the last man rather than be cornered like rats in a trap.

But their manœuvre in running away from the machine-guns was merely to separate the patrol from the support of those guns. They knew every inch of these treacherous valleys and plateaux, and as soon as they had drawn us sufficiently they turned like one man and opened a blazing fire. Down we went, throwing up what little breastwork and shelter we could while endeavouring to return their fire. There was, it seemed, still some possibility of this bunch breaking through our lines and making for the hilltop and the open country beyond, for the machine-gunners who had come so efficiently to our aid had by this time gone to the assistance of another section.

The rascallions had drawn us beautifully. We were checked on a more or less open plateau while they attacked from the shelter of a patch of wood! We were using every bit of scrub and stone, but at that, the position could not be tolerated for many minutes. I guess the Skipper did some hard thinking during those few hectic minutes. We had to rush the open for five hundred yards or so before we could reach their shelter. Or stay put? Which? I viewed the situation with Bain.

"Take a chance and lose half our mob, huh?"

"Or wait until those scouting gunners come up again?"

"Yeah? How long we gotta wait? I guess we should rush the swine. Gee! J'ever see such a bunch of fighters? Thought we were in for a lil' skirmish when we blew in on this racket."

"Much bigger crowd than we anticipated."



"ARABIAN BANDITS ARE WILEFUL RASCALS."

[Photo : Central Press Photos, Ltd.]

"I'll say! Gosh! Where's Gyppo?"

"Haven't seen him since we left the machine-gunners. Maybe he's lying up on the hill there . . . with the others."

For the next fifteen minutes we had a busy time, keeping under cover and answering back, volley for volley. Then it came. Charge! We did. The Skipper was the first on his feet, racing ahead of his men across that open space. As I followed him I saw him stumble, flop down into the dirt, and I thought he was finished. But as I reached his side he was up again and racing forward. One arm hung dead, in the hand of the other was a Mauser pistol, blazing away like hell. The rebels dropped four of our Cossacks as we leapt that intervening plateau.

Then we were in amongst them, stumbling through the little patch of trees and driving the devils before us. I felt a sudden hot sting in my neck. A bullet had grazed the skin. Another inch! But there was no stopping to investigate. In a few moments we were through the trees and had driven the bandits on to a clearing. After that, it was child's play. We had them on the run and kept them running. In the distance, less than half a mile away, was the landing station. All around us, emerging from gulleys and dropping down the slopes like so many flies, were the other detachments of our column, each driving before it a ragged band of rebels!

It was an amazing sight—a score of miniature engagements in operation at the same time, like a military drill ground when it is occupied with various squads at bayonet practice! But there was no practice about this. The Arabs, thoroughly cornered now,

on all sides, were prepared to fight to the last ditch. In their eyes it was infinitely better than being taken alive and then to suffer some lengthy imprisonment or worse.

So the sickening scraps went on and on, wearily, right up to the walls of the station itself, and brown men were going down like rotten sheep all over the place. Great ugly vultures were hovering. Those winged beasts can smell death miles away. Some were already busy on the hillsides, and the sight was not pretty.

Then, suddenly, out of the blue, came other birds of the air, mechanical birds droning their way into this scene of slaughter and death. They were bombing 'planes. But they were helpless. Never a bomb was dropped. They could not scatter these bloodthirsty marauders without hitting us as well. So they just circled and hovered and waited. An almost incredible scene. But I think it was the presence of these 'planes that finally broke the morale of the rebels. Ragged remnants threw down their arms, stood sullenly about, fatalists to the last, waiting to be shot.

A couple of hundred of them were rounded up and driven into the compound of the station, and a strong guard posted. When we reached the fort the 'planes had come down, rations were being issued to hungry soldiers, medical officers were busy, a temporary hospital was being thrown up, the day's work was by no means done. It was then late in the afternoon and we had been engaged in this colossal round-up of desperate bandits for the better part of twelve hours!

"What happened to Gyppo, Skipper?" I queried, in some trepidation.

Armstrong, one arm in a sling and his face carrying an ugly gash, shook his head. He was lining up the Fourteenth for roll-call. In addition to Gyppo, the missing included Tasa, the German, Pirando, a Spaniard, Tsamorsui, the Jap, seventeen of the Cossacks and five Wahabis. How many of them were wounded? How many dead?

Scout parties were being organised among the various companies. Every man of the Fourteenth who was not too badly wounded fell in for the search. It was decided that each unit should cover the ground it had fought over, retrieve its own dead and wounded. It was a grim task. But it had to be done before nightfall. Neither dead nor wounded could be left to prowling jackals. . . .

"But, Gyppo . . . ?" I muttered, as we trudged back.

"Yeah," commented Bain. "I guess I know what you feel, old son."

"That little rascal and I have been through a devil of a lot together," I muttered.

"Quit worrying, Digger. We'll find him!"

CHAPTER XII

THE HASHISH SMUGGLERS

BAIN was right. We found Gyppo. He was a sight I shall never forget. The women of Kurdistan had been busy. And bad as the Druse women could be, they had nothing on these wretched females of the hills. Gyppo was dead. Even now I find it difficult to think of what that tough little wiry devil must have suffered in his last moments.

He had an ugly bullet wound in the throat, but he must still have breathed when those brown fiends found him, otherwise they would not have troubled to vent their sadistic pleasures upon him. They never trouble the dead. They get no kick out of using the knife on the body of a dead man. Mercifully, he could not have lasted long under their hands. That was the bit of consolation we had as we rearranged his person in the semblance of a man. We buried him deep, with nothing to mark the spot. Indeed we did our best to hide the fact of burial.

Armstrong was dumb. So was I. I guess we were both thinking of how we slipped the Legion and how we trekked five days together, until thirst and the desert had almost got us. How little Gyppo had said again and again that he would go anywhere with "Amstring and Digger." Only a half-caste Egyptian, but, God in heaven! what a fighter! What a man! We were familiar enough with mutilation and death. The lives we led

would harden any man. But Gyppo! Gyppo was different. It was frightfully difficult accepting the fact of his death. . . .

Tas, our German member, went west also, but only after we had found him. He was half buried in the dirt, as if he had been trying to dig his own grave. He stared at us, his eyes eloquent with pleading. He was begging to be put out of his misery. Speech had gone from him then. But his eyes! How they talked! One big fist was clenched taut over a hank of hair. That told its own tale, a tale of a ghastly struggle with women who wanted to play. . . . He, too, had been a great fighter, and like most of his race, an adventurer at heart. And his last fight, his most desperate, had been with women, one of whom had lost a fistful of hair from her tousled mat. So Armstrong gave him the merciful bullet between the eyes.

We were in time to save nine of the Cossacks, the others were dead or dying—for the women had been disturbed by our return. The five Wahabis, those strange fellows of the Moslem faith who owed allegiance to Christian authority, all seriously wounded, had escaped the attentions of the women, since they were recognised as brothers of the Faith. They had known the women were at work on their brothers of the patrol. They had yelled the curses of Allah upon them, but being unable to move, had been helpless in the face of that scene of slaughter and mutilation.

We never found Pirando, the Spaniard, though we searched every inch of the ground. We never learned what became of him. He was always something of a mystery, and his disappearance during the scrap was the complete mystery. It was suggested that he had

gone with the women, forcibly or voluntarily. It seemed like an explanation. But the truth was that we simply did not know. We never knew.

"Mebbe he's changed his faith," said Bain, "mebbe."

But I was too sick and weary to argue. What did it matter what Pirando had done? Gyppo was definitely gone. Gyppo would never return.

It was Bain who found his traditional enemy, Tsamorsui, the Jap. The Oriental had managed to crawl under a heap of boulders in spite of a shattered leg, and there he had lain, listening to the heartrending screams of the men under the knife, wondering how soon the women would discover him and get to work. . . . He spent the next three months in dock in Baghdad.

It was perhaps as well that at this period, after some few weeks rest and re-organisation at our headquarters in Ramadi, life suddenly became very hectic in the pursuit of hashish smugglers. The engagement helped one to forget to some extent the ghastly aftermath of Tel Kala.

The war that had been going on for many years had redoubled in intensity as the result of the activities all over Arabia of Cairo's Narcotic Intelligence Bureau. The half-million or so of people in Egypt who were estimated to be regular hashish smokers were being recognised as a grave menace in the Near East. The traffic had grown to such an alarming extent that the powers decided to stamp it out once and for all. There was to be a huge drive extending from Baghdad to Khartoum, a gigantic sweep of Arabia in order to get at the sources of supply.

The centuries-old caravan route between Baghdad

and Damascus became the happy hunting ground of the Fourteenth Irak Patrol. We were loping across the desert wastes that border Mesopotamia and Syria when the familiar crack of rifles warned us that our two scouts away on the horizon had made some sort of discovery. We raced towards them. They were Wahabis and two of our most reliable sand trackers. They could not only read the tracks in the sand but were able to determine by the hoof impressions just what sort of caravan had passed by and whether it was lightly or heavily laden.

In this case the impression was that a string of twenty camels had recently crossed our path but there was no sign that they carried heavy packs. Nevertheless we decided to trail them and investigate. It was then early morning and the sun was beginning to beat down with its merciless heat. The air was parched, arid. The deep sand of that area glistening in the haze. It was difficult to see far ahead—except for the Wahabis, who were naturally long-sighted and felt no discomfort in the thick heat haze.

We followed the trail until well past noon. Then we came upon the parting of the ways. For some mysterious reason two of the camels in the caravan had shot off abruptly at right angles to the remainder. There were now two tracks. The difficulty was to know which one to follow. This trick, however, was not an unusual one. It was agreed that Armstrong should carry on with the patrol in the wake of the caravan and that I, taking half a dozen men, should follow the two mysterious camels. The Skipper was to hold the main body of the caravan until I turned up again.

Thereupon I led my little party in the trail of the two camels that had so mysteriously left the caravan. We travelled at a good speed, for the track was simplified and easy to follow. After a couple of hours hard loping we came to a break in the plains. The tracks led us into a wilderness of scrub and boulders. Here it was not so easy to keep on the tail of the two camels. We had perforce to walk warily. Eventually we came upon a walled village. The area was unfamiliar to me, and I wondered whether this village would prove hostile. We were then some sixty miles from the spot where we had left the patrol. We were half a dozen men against a village of probably two hundred.

A surprise awaited us before we reached the village, however. We found two dead camels among the boulders. What was more significant, they had been killed within half an hour of our reaching the spot, for the poor beasts were still warm. Huge patches of hair had been cut away from the beasts' sides. And that was more significant still—to a desert policeman searching for hashish traders!

"Yeah," remarked Bain, who had accompanied my party, "I'll say it's significant! A couple of valuable camels killed and chucked away in this fashion! And with great tufts of hair torn out of their hides! The Arab wallah who'd do that *must* be desperate, huh! If I know anything about Arabs, I guess they'd rather slaughter a brother than a camel."

Which was true. To an Arab, real wealth is measured in camels. Why had these two been killed? Their owner had seen us trailing him, obviously, had decided that the camels would give him away—doctored as they were, and had therefore abandoned the tell-tale

beasts and got clear with the dope. He was somewhere in that village—carrying a quantity of hashish. We had all the evidence we wanted now. He would return for his dead beasts after we had gone, supposing we failed to get him, for even dead camels are valuable.

We lost the Arab's tracks in a medley of churned-up dust near the village gates, due to the constant passing of people, camels, donkeys and goats. The village seemed to be the grain centre for the farmsteads round the area. We questioned the keeper at the gates. He received our queries with the usual sullen indifference. Bain was all for making the fellow loosen-up by physical force. But that did not seem to me very wise. He doubtless had the whole village on his side. We should gain nothing by making these desert natives more hostile than they already were. Strategy not fisticuffs was what we required.

I managed to persuade the keeper in the belief that fifty of our desert police were hidden among the boulders a few hundred yards from the village walls and that their machine-guns were trained on him and his village. He then decided to open up. It was true that a camelteer had recently passed that way, had, in fact, entered the village, carrying camel bags, but without his camels. Where had this man gone? He had made his way towards the bazaar.

We rode through the gates and down towards a straggling roadway lined with the usual hodge-podge of stalls and booths. We were met with lowering glances. We were not exactly welcome. But no one interfered. Neither did any offer us help. They knew why we were amongst them. The story of our presence there had flashed round the village like wild-fire. So

also had the story about our friends being hidden out there among the stones with machine-guns caught on. I imagine that those who were in the act of departing from the village to their farms gave the spot a wide berth. They did not like machine-guns.

Frankly, I had not much hope of finding the wallah with the hashish. The village was small. There were hardly more than a hundred inhabitants. But there were many places where a man could hide himself. It began to look like deadlock to me. What was to be done? Wait here while a couple of scouts went for the patrol? That would take time and dusk would descend soon. After nightfall we could give up hope of ever finding the man with the hashish.

We made short work of searching the little huddle of habitations. The local forum, where the heads of the village foregathered to sip scented tea, smoke, and talk politics, proved equally barren. It was the merest chance that gave us the first clue. One of our Wahabis overheard a wisp of conversation which led us to the belief that the man we wanted worked for a fruit seller in the bazaar.

We hurried to the yard of the fruit merchant. I placed the merchant and his assistant under arrest just to be on the safe side. Then we made a thorough search of the place—for a second time. I sat in the middle of the yard and stared and stared at the stacks of dates while the men turned everything over. It looked pretty hopeless. Bain shook his head.

"Plenty saddle bags around, Digger, but not a sign of that damned hashish. What'n hell are we going to do? It'll be dark in a couple of hours!"

"I've thought of that."

Then it came to me in a flash. Dates! God in heaven! Why hadn't I thought of it before! Dates! Of course. This fruit-seller's yard was the finest place in the world for concealing such a substance as hashish. The appearance of hashish, it should be noted, is not unlike slabs of linseed cattle-cake. It would be an easy thing to cover such slabs with sticky dates! I rose from my seat and strolled casually over to where the merchant and his assistant, lounging in a corner, were smoking and chatting together, utterly indifferent, it seemed, to our efforts. It was all over, so far as I was concerned. I knew where to find the stuff. But first I had the two securely bound and strapped to camels ready for the getaway. As soon as we had found the dope we should be in rather a hurry to get away!

Bain stared, grinned.

"What's the big idea?"

"Dates," I said.

The American gazed at me for a minute as if I'd gone berserk. Then his face suddenly lit up.

"Gosh! Why'n hell didn't we think of that before?"

We began to attack the dates, stripping the stacks layer by layer. There must have been nearly half a ton all ready and stacked, waiting for camel transport to Damascus. In a few moments it was lying about the courtyard in bits and we had exposed the slabs of hashish. Those dates were probably worth a fiver or so to the merchant—but the dope we found was worth at least £350.

The looks on the faces of those two men, merchant and assistant, were decidedly rich. As soon as we attacked the dates there had come into their eyes that look of cunning and assumed nonchalance so peculiar

to the native mentality. But like all Arabians, they knew how to accept their fate.

We were jubilant, of course. This merchant and his assistant would not only suffer imprisonment, but they would be fined heavily as well. And the Fourteenth Patrol would receive a percentage of that fine!

We were not long in stowing the precious slabs in our saddle-packs. We rode through the bazaar with ugly growls at our heels. But they did not worry us. Had we not the support of those fifty mythical machine-gunners? In a few moments we had left the village with our prisoners and were loping along at a terrific rate, the long legs of our beasts working like pistons and racing us along at nearly forty miles to the hour. It had taken us a couple of hours to find that village. By sunset we were back at the spot where we had left the Skipper.

Dusk then gave way to nightfall. It was a memorable ride over that silvery sheet of sand. The tracks were as plain as if seen by daylight. We kept up the pace hour after hour. It seemed that we, this little band of men, were alone in the world. There was hardly a sound, save the soft crunch of the velvet-footed beasts as they leapt in and out of the sand, an occasional grunt when one camel loped too closely to another, a weird night-cry from distant pariah pack. Presently we dropped to a walk-march. It seemed that the silence deepened. We were still following the tracks of our patrol. They must have made good going after we had left them. We had no doubt of their having come up with that string of camels.

The cool breezes of the midnight hour played about us. Still we plodded on. There did not appear to be

anything ahead, save that immovable moonlit wall of jade. No one spoke. Maybe no one cared to break the spell of the soft, irradiant hour. An awe-inspiring spectacle. A night and a ride for dreams, fancies, for sprites' dances, for vain, sentimental longings, yearnings. . . .

We were still following those tracks when the moon paled, the green radiance gave place to soft violet gloom, through which the lights of a myriad low-hanging stars pierced, glistening, scintillating. We rode on. The magic held for a space. Then came a slow crumbling. A thick dull mist, blotting out earth and sky, so that we came to a sudden halt, checked in our tracks, waiting, waiting for dawn.

It came, suddenly, a conflagration of the heavens reflected on the burnt dust of the plains. We loped forward at increased speed. Men were awake again. Crimson daylight was flooding the earth. The tracks were clear. We marvelled at the pace those camels must have made through the night. Ours had been swift. But we had to carry on for more than three hours of the new day before we came within sight of the patrol.

We saw the black smudge on the blazing horizon. We broke loose, racing like madmen. Presently we could make out the silhouetted lines of men, tents and beasts. Two men had mounted, broken away from camp, were racing towards us. Now the air was filled with clamour and the shouts of men. We rode in to find the patrol at rest, a number of them guarding a dozen Arab camelteers.

I reported our find to the Skipper, telling him how we had very nearly been tricked, how the two camels

had been killed and abandoned, and handed over the date merchant and his assistant.

"I guess they gave us a good run," remarked Bain. "That wall of dates had us licked . . . plenty—until Digger suddenly decided to break it up, huh?"

"Good business, you fellows," grinned the Skipper. "But come over here and take a dekko at these beasts."

The Skipper showed us eighteen camels. Great tufts of hair had been shaved from the hump of each beast. These were in the same state as the two we had seen outside the village, except that these were very much alive. Slabs of hashish had been glued to the shaven patches of the camels' humps and tufts of hair had been stuck over the hashish. The job had been done so neatly, said the Skipper, that it was almost impossible to detect the device.

When the Patrol had come up with this string of camels the Skipper had been mystified by the fact that none carried saddle or vestige of baggage. The camel men had said they were taking the beasts to Damascus to be sold. The story hardly squared with their attitude when they were being chased by the patrol, for they had tried to outdistance the police.

Then Armstrong had been struck by the unusually long hair of these beasts. They had not been clipped that year. Since they were to be sold, why had they not been clipped? Camel hair is valuable. No Arab in his senses would think of selling a beast without first clipping away the long hair—for which he has very many uses. On the face of it, the whole business was decidedly suspicious.

The Skipper had begun by running his hand through the fine silky hair of the hump of one of the beasts,



DESERT POLICE AND THEIR VELVET-FOOTED MOUNTS

[Photo: Fox Photos, Ltd.]

when he suddenly felt something hard under the hair. Then he knew. He pursued the matter no further until the camel men had been safely roped together. After which he set the patrol to work on the eighteen camels, relieving the beasts of patches of hair and slabs of hashish. It was a wonderful haul—between five and six thousand pounds' worth! They had thought to lead the whole patrol astray by sending those two camels to the village. As it turned out, however, the result was net gain for the Fourteenth Irak Desert Patrol.

CHAPTER XIII

OIL

FROM dates to oil. At least one thing can be said in favour of the work of the Irak Desert Patrols—it is full of variety. We had done our bit in the great round-up of hashish smugglers and now we were on our way to a first-class mystery that concerned the disappearance of the manager of an oil station at Tel Bor—an isolated spot on the great pipe-line that runs across the desert from Northern Arabia to the Mediterranean coast.

“This will be the lady of the establishment.”

I nodded. In the distance was a lone rider. A woman. She came steadily towards us, handling her spirited black barb like one accustomed to the saddle. The situation was intriguing. We had trekked a long way to discover just what was happening at this lonesome station nestling beneath the hills. Doubtless the lady could tell us. At any rate, it was her husband who was missing.

“Queer sort of life for a woman.”

“You said it, Digger. I guess a dame like that must think plenty of her man to come to a God-forsaken spot like this.”

The lady came up at the gallop. We had a bit of a shock. She was younger than we expected a woman in such a job to be—certainly not more than twenty-four. Her round piquant face was flushed with colour. The cropped black hair was bunched about her ears

and her dark eyes flashed under the thin pencilling of the brows. She wore an open-neck blouse of white silk, white jodhpurs secured with an ornate girdle that she'd picked up in some bazaar. Her white topee had a flapping sunblind of generous proportions—what they call in the Legion *couvre-nuque*—and a thick white spine-pad was buttoned to the back of her blouse. Evidently a little lady with some experience of the sun's treacherous rays. She was undeniably pretty, and very, very sure of herself.

No one would have guessed from her demeanour that her husband had been missing for a couple of days, that two others who had gone in search of him had been unable to communicate with her because, somewhere down that length of pipe-line, the telephone wire had been cut. She led us into the compound and we dismounted. There were about thirty natives engaged at the post and half a dozen Britishers.

"Tell me what happened," said the Skipper.

The girl eyed Armstrong with obvious approval.

"I'm not troubled with nerves," she smiled. "I've been out two years and seen this pipe-line grow. We've had no sort of trouble before. But when a second day passed—well, I thought I'd better let headquarters know. Jack—my husband—went out to inspect his section of the line. He took his servant with him, a trustworthy Baghdadi. It's about forty-five miles to the next station. When he didn't turn up night before last I thought he had stayed overnight at Gulliver's station—that's the next one south. When there was no news yesterday, two of our men, Farrow and Brenton, went off to see what they could find. They hadn't been gone an hour when we discovered

that the communication had been cut. At any rate we can't get through to Gulliver's station. . . ."

"That leaves you with three white men here, Mrs. Wentworth?"

"Yes. . . . And a mystery down the line. . . . I didn't like the idea of any more going off in search. . . ."

"Hardly advisable," agreed Armstrong. "I'll run the Patrol down as far as Gulliver's station. We should make it before sundown. . . . The trouble may be at the other station. . . . You know Gulliver, of course?"

"Yes."

A peculiar look came into the girl's eyes. It was not lost upon Armstrong. He stared for a minute.

"Known him long?"

"Oh, yes. He used to be here with my husband."

"What . . . er . . . caused him to change over to the other station?"

"He was put in charge there. . . . Sort of promotion."

"I see."

But the Skipper didn't see at all. Like Bain and myself, he was beginning to scent a deeper mystery—connected maybe with Mrs. Wentworth and Gulliver. In the first place, the woman was not at all ready to open out regarding the man at the next station. She was content to be just monosyllabic.

"Considering that communication between this station and Gulliver's has been cut since yesterday morning—how is it that he has not come along or sent someone to inquire?"

The girl and the man stared at each other.

"That is a query worrying me, too!"

Armstrong jumped up, took a turn or two along the verandah, where we had gathered to discuss the situation. The bungalow was the Wentworths' headquarters, a sandstone erection built with Arab labour, broken up with archways instead of windows, and delightfully cool. Mrs. Wentworth sat in a deck chair and stared across the compound. I wondered greatly just what she was thinking. She was a lovely woman, the sort who could fit herself into the most unusual surroundings and remain attractive. There was a healthy bloom in her cheeks and the bare arms and "V" of the neck were sun-kissed to creamy brown. The dark liquid eyes held one. There was something undeniably attractive and not a little mysterious about those eyes. Such a woman, in such an environment, with half a dozen white men. . . . All sorts of queries raced about the mind. . . .

I know that the Skipper was troubled too. It was not possible to tell what he thought. That bearded poker face rarely gave him away. But I knew by his restless movements that he was bursting with queries—queries he would have liked to ask this girl-wife of Jack Wentworth. But how could he? Women were not his strong suit. In all the years I knew him I could recollect only one woman ever making an impression on him—an Armenian girl named Zara, who had proved so extraordinarily useful to us on more than one occasion.

"Would you care to accompany us, Mrs. Wentworth?"

There was an unexpected pause.

"If you think it necessary, Captain Armstrong."

A strange answer from a woman supposed to be anxious about a missing husband. Her manner implied more than she dared say, apparently. Was her fear of meeting Gulliver stronger than her anxiety about her husband . . . ? But what was the good of conjectures?

"You have no idea at all . . . no theory as to what may have happened to your husband?"

"It's a complete mystery to me."

"You know that he would not . . . er . . . voluntarily . . . ?"

"Absolutely not!"

"When was Gulliver last here?"

"A week ago."

"Just an ordinary visit in the way of business, I suppose?"

"That is so."

"Nothing unusual occurred during his visit?"

Mrs. Wentworth hesitated. It seemed that the colour in her face deepened and that peculiar look came again into her dark eyes.

"All right, Mrs. Wentworth. I think I understand."

The Skipper rapped out an order. The patrol mounted. In a couple of minutes we were loping along in a southerly direction towards the next station on the pipe-line. Bain and I rode at the head of the string with Armstrong. The American was inclined to be facetious about the affair.

"That li'l' dame's a good looker, Skipper," he said, "and I guess she's at the back of this trouble. Looks as if Gulliver and the girl had been a bit too intimate for Boss Wentworth, huh?"

"That's the obvious explanation of her attitude," commented Armstrong dryly, "but not of Wentworth's

disappearance. It doesn't explain the cut telephone.
..."

There came the sudden, double crack of rifles.

"The scouts have got something!"

As usual, we had a couple of the Wahabis riding ahead, not merely on the lookout, but to search the sand for tracks. But long before we had reached them we saw the slack of the telephone wire lying about the plains. We came up with the scouts to find them bending over the figure of a white man. He was slumped against the telegraph pole, eyes closed, breathing heavily, his shirt torn open where he had tried to get at the lacerated flesh. It looked as if a dum-dum bullet had run all over his chest.

We cleaned and bandaged the ugly wound and gave him spirits. I gave an exclamation at the sight of the bullet we extracted. A hole had been drilled through the top. A soft-nosed bullet. An old eastern trick. Drilling a hole in the top of a cartridge causes it to spread like a dum-dum bullet when it strikes a man and makes a pretty ghastly wound.

"Soft-nosed bullet, hah!" growled Bain.

The Skipper just stared at it, his jaw set, a grave look in his steely eyes. From the description supplied us, we had no difficulty in recognising the wounded man as Wentworth. He looked a tough proposition and he must have put up the very father and mother of a scrap before they got him.

"How did he manage to climb that post and cut the wire?" queried Armstrong.

Exactly! The fellow must have had a constitution of iron. Whoever had shot him had concluded he was finished. Instead of which he had seen them away and

then slowly and agonisingly climbed the telegraph pole by means of the step-irons in order to cut the wire and warn the stations that something was wrong!

"So what!" snapped Bain. "Guess we gotta find these wallahs and make 'em open up on this mystery, huh?"

But Wentworth was unable to help us in this. We spent an hour trying to get him out of the coma into which he had fallen after that perilous climb. The Skipper had him slung between two camels and with an escort of six men he was taken back to his station, where he had the best chance of medical help.

Meanwhile, we had the job of finding the gang responsible. There was no doubt that a gang had been here. We found the impressions of their horses all over the place—tell-tale imprints that told of a scuffle between a lone rider and a bunch of cut-throats. What had happened to the two men who had gone in search of Wentworth it was impossible to guess.

The scouts went off in the trail of those hoof-prints and we followed. They led us a merry dance, hour after hour. It was black night when we reached the mouth of a narrow gorge into which the imprints disappeared. We pulled up sharply. This looked remarkably like a trap.

"Couch your beasts across the mouth," ordered the Skipper, in tones deadly quiet. "We are not going in. Neither are they coming out. We'll squat till dawn."

It must then have been midnight. In less than four hours the light would be up again. It was eerie work, lying there waiting and watching. Not a sound broke the stillness. Queer shapes seemed to take form in the denseness of that sinister gulley. No man spoke. But

one's thoughts raced. It might be that in waiting through the long hours we had let the gang escape. On the other hand, it would have been suicide for the patrol to enter that treacherous gulley. It was a mystery valley to us in the daylight. It would have been hopeless in that dense blackness. Great was our relief when we saw the first streak of dawn.

"Mount!" snapped Armstrong.

In a few more minutes the light was blazing its way across the blue-grey dome. We went cautiously forward in double column with the two scouts a few yards ahead. The morning silence was suddenly shattered by gunfire. The camels had couched on the instant. They required no order. Our scouts were down in the lee of a bank of trees, beckoning. The Skipper arranged for a number to go forward while the rest kept guard over the camels.

The two scouts had drawn the fire. After they had leapt to the ground there was silence. We joined them by crawling on all fours. The bank of trees skirted a ledge of rock from which we could look down on a wide expanse of valley. Here and there behind boulders, mounds and other breastworks, we could detect the flutter of a *burnous*.

There was little likelihood of these bandits surrendering. They were returning volley for volley. The fight was on! The Skipper raised his head for the fraction of a second above the boulder behind which he was crouching. He ducked suddenly. Bullets flattened themselves against the stone. A grim smile lit up his bronzed features. This was a job after his own heart.

From where we crouched there was a good view of

the bandits' little stronghold. They had been busy during the night throwing up breastworks. It seemed they had settled in for a long stay. Armstrong decided to change his tactics.

"Pass the word along to cease fire," he snapped.

The patrol fire died down. That of the bandits slackened, came over intermittently. There were some five hundred yards between us and the bandits. But the Skipper decided it was too early to make a charge. Those fellows could hardly climb out of the gully. It would mean leaving their mounts behind and risking our shots as they scaled the hillside. They could have no idea that we were trailing them when they made for this haven. Now they were trapped.

The Skipper's eyes suddenly narrowed. Crouching beside him, I too saw the flutter of a Kurd's white *burnous*, not more than a few inches of material, but enough to show between the boulders. At a sign from Armstrong, an automatic rifle was passed along to him. Slowly he drew it in position, aimed, fired—rat-tat-tat . . . rat-tat-tat-tat-tat. . . . The gun blazed about the spot where that bit of native robe had shown itself. There came a sudden yelp. A pair of arms shot up and a gun slithered down into the valley below.

"Good shot, Skipper," grinned Bain.

"Hope it was their chief," said I.

"That would hardly demoralize them. This mob will hang together as long as they can."

"You said it, Skipper," chuckled Bain. "Hang is correct!"

We detected another movement behind the stones along the valley. Instantly Armstrong's fingers were pressing the firing-button—rat-tat-tat-tat-tat. . . . A

pause. Bain slipped in another belt of bullets. The Skipper sprayed the gulley with a hail of lead, moving his gun in the crevice of stones as if it were on a pivot. The belts snaked through at the rate of seventy bullets to the minute. The rest of us lay and watched. It was a pretty piece of mechanism we had lately acquired, and this was the first opportunity we had had to make real use of it. It was so light that it could be fired from a man's back. The Skipper was certainly making a hot corner for the outlaws.

The patrol rested for the next three hours. Armstrong was able to hold the bandits' fire, and when he tired one or other of us took over. We could not guess at the number the gun had accounted for, but there came occasional and involuntary cries as one of the outlaws met a spot of flying lead. We found it necessary to move the automatic to fresh positions, for the bandits were concentrating on that spouting flame.

"But this is leading us nowhere," commented Armstrong, at last. "Pass the word to prepare to charge. I'll keep the gun firing for three minutes. As soon as I stop, we jump this ledge and rush their position. Got that?"

The word was passed round. Every man was on the alert, crouching ready to make the leap. Fingers itched about trigger-guards. The Skipper's automatic suddenly ceased chattering. On the instant the whole bunch of us leapt over the ledge and raced towards the bandits' cover, firing from the hip as we ran.

"Come on, men of the Fourteenth!"

But we hardly needed any invitation. We had lain idle long enough. There came a raucous cry from the native element of the patrol, which was quickly taken

up by the Cossacks. We raced forward like a bunch of crazy schoolboys. A shower of lead met us. Some of the patrol were brought up sharply, one or two wounded, but the check was not serious. We raced on again while the bullets whirled and whined about us.

It was only a matter of minutes before we were leaping the bandits' wall of boulders and were right in amongst them. Then followed a lively hand-to-hand scrimmage. The great towering figure of Skipper Armstrong seemed to be in a dozen places at once, swinging the butt of his rifle about him, cracking skulls like egg-shells. The outlaws were kicking up a terrific din, yelling and screaming to Allah to help them, while they slashed about with their knives—for the fighting was then at such close quarters that it was impossible to use firearms.

That desperate scuffle did not last very many minutes, though it seemed like hours. Except for the regulation *Abba* which we wore, there was nothing to distinguish enemy from police. To the onlooker we might just have been rival bands of black-bearded Arabians settling a quarrel!

The Patrol fought like men possessed. We knew what we were up against. Fighting was an industry with these wallahs. In their faith it was an honour before Allah to die fighting. I shall not soon forget one ghastly moment of that scrap. The Skipper came within an ace of death. A Kurd ducked under his flying rifle-butt and the knife was within an inch of Armstrong's face when Bain's gun crashed on the bandit's shoulder, sending the razor-edged weapon slithering into the dirt.

Those Kurds screamed like maniacs as they slashed

and fought. But it was soon clear that they were getting the worst of it. The ground was covered with their wounded—as well as a number of our own. Even when their number had been reduced to a mere ten men, they fought on. These men of the hills never ran from battle. They fought almost to the last man.

We rounded up forty of them, all more or less seriously wounded. We roped them together. They looked a sorry sight as we led them from the gulley on to the open plains. There we pitched camp. It was a good haul—forty prisoners and as many mounts. Then began the serious business of discovering why Wentworth had been attacked and left for dead.

Armstrong called for the leader of the outlaws. A great burly brute strode forward. His beard was matted with blood trickling from a gash in the temple, but his black eyes twinkled and his wide mouth was set in an impudent grin. He acknowledged defeat. Apparently he was ready to make friendly overtures. But when the Skipper questioned him regarding the attack on Wentworth the bandit chief shook his head and continued to grin.

“Don’t intend to talk, eh?”

Armstrong snatched at the outlaw’s cartridge belt and with a sharp sweep of his knife he slashed it free. With the belt in his hands he began to examine the cartridges. Little holes had been bored into them. Soft-nosed bullets. One of these had spread itself over Wentworth’s chest.

“Who paid you to murder Wentworth Sahib, of Tel Bor oil station?”

The bandit shook his head, still grinning.

"Shall we make him open up?" growled Bain.

For my part, I was content to stand by and watch. No white man knew the native mind better than Skipper Armstrong. I could see by the cold light in his eyes that some plan was taking shape in his mind. Humiliation was the keynote. No Kurdish chief could survive humiliation. To humiliate him before his own band was to award him something worse than death. . . . The Skipper could always take a leaf out of the Moslem's own book. He gave the order for a stake to be driven into the ground. Round and about this a wide circle of prisoners with their guards was arranged, so that all could see the Moslem method of making a man talk.

Then the Skipper called up a couple of hefty Cossacks and ordered them to strip the outlaw and secure him to the stake. And though such a procedure was humiliation enough in the eyes of his followers, the bandit chief continued to shake his head, continued to grin at Armstrong's questioning . . . until he saw the knife in the white man's hand. The grin died suddenly. For the first time fear showed in the black eyes.

"Who paid you to murder Wentworth Sahib?"

Armstrong, knife in hand, stood within a few inches of the naked outlaw, his cold eyes on the muscular brown torso. There was not a sound from the big circle of squatting men—patrol and prisoners. All eyes were fixed on the tableau of the two men in the centre, the big white man in *burnous* and *haik*, the even bigger brown man who was naked and lashed to a post.

"Gee!" murmured Bain, "is the old bandit going to take the tit-tat-too on his carcase!"

This method of "persuasion" was known among the folk of Arabia as the torture of "a thousand cuts." It was used not only on white men whom they took prisoner, but on their own kind who had too far transgressed some law of the Koran. It was a diabolical and excruciatingly painful torture, but to the Moslem mind it was more humiliating than painful.

As he approached with the point of the knife, Armstrong's face was set like marble, an immobile face that might have been chiselled out of cold stone. It looked old—like a roughly-carved image. And the face of the brown man was no longer brown. It was grey. Sweat poured down it in dirty rivulets. The big dark animal's eyes were lit with terror, the mouth open, dumb tongue hanging. It seemed as if the bandit were petrified into speechlessness.

"Talk! Damn you!" snarled Armstrong, approaching the quivering mass of brown torso.

At the first touch of the knife the Kurd let out a terrific yell.

"I tell you, Captain Sahib! I tell you!"

Armstrong flung the knife into the dirt and beckoned to the waiting Cossacks. The Kurd was cut loose and the silent crowd watched while he wrapped his clothes about his great muscular frame. The impudent grin had returned to his face. He was his swaggering self once more.

"Who paid you to murder Wentworth Sahib?"

"Gulliver Sahib."

The bandit answered without hesitation.

"Where are Farrow and Brenton—Wentworth's men, and the Baghdadi, Wentworth's servant?"

"Gulliver station. They sick men."

The Skipper barked his orders. In two minutes the whole bunch of us, patrol and prisoners, were galloping towards the Gulliver station. We must have made a pretty picture—the bandits roped to their racing barbs, and the horses in turn secured to our even swifter dromedaries.

We found a terribly chaotic state of affairs at the station where Gulliver was in charge. He was not in charge any more. He was just a raving lunatic, racing around with a hammer in his hands, smashing everything he could reach, while a group of Arab coolies stood about and roared with merriment. The feed-pipes were gushing oil all over the place. The bungalow was wrecked. The whole place looked as if it had met a cyclone.

At the sight of us, Gulliver rushed forward, waving his crazy weapon and yelling curses upon us. His eyes were bloodshot, his mouth foamed, his clothes were spattered with oil and filth. He was the most pitiable wretch I've ever seen. There was murder in his eyes as he stumbled towards the Skipper. But Armstrong's gun barked suddenly. Gulliver staggered. His useless arm flopped and the hammer fell into the dust. Half-a-dozen of us leapt upon him and tied him up—except his wounded arm, which we cleaned and bandaged.

Then began the sickening job of rounding up the station staff. The Arabs gave no trouble. They were town Arabs and without the guts of their Bedouin brethren. The four European members were another proposition altogether. We found them in their bunks—doped, and pretty badly doped at that. There had been some method in Gulliver's madness.

"Well, for crying out loud!" exclaimed Bain. "Can you beat it!"

"Gulliver certainly took it in the neck," I said, staring round at the appalling wreckage.

"Yeah. I'll say. One man with heat stroke—and a woman in the background—and whaddya know! An oil station is wrecked and half a dozen fellows are under the table. Gosh!"

That frightful mess took some clearing up. The Fourteenth Patrol had had some queer jobs at one time and another, but the strangest of all was to find ourselves in charge of an oil station for the better part of three weeks!

We found Farrow and Brenton, eventually, lost in the desert, more dead than alive. Doped as they were, they had tried to make their way back to the Tel Bor Station to report what was happening at Gulliver's place. They had staggered about for two days in the blazing heat, until they could stagger no longer. We found them just in time, though I fear that neither would ever be the same again. The heat had taken its toll.

The Baghdadi we never found, even though we did not give up the search for many days. Another mystery of the desert.

Wentworth was invalided home. His pretty wife went with him. Which was just as well. The place for wives, they say, is in the home. Certainly the Irak desert, with its temperature of 125°, is no place for them. There are some corners of the desert that are too much for certain types of white men. Tel Bor is one of them. That is why I can never hear the word oil mentioned without having the craziest pictures conjured up in a mind otherwise fairly stable!

CHAPTER XIV

THE SLAVE-GIRL RACKET

WE came upon the slave-girl racket in the most curious, even amusing fashion. We were trekking in the wild broken country of the extreme north at the time, a desolate region of tumbling little hills and valleys, patches of vegetation and tracts of sand. After halting under the lee of a hill for the afternoon siesta, so much enjoyed by our native members, the Skipper, Bain and I had decided on a stroll.

It was a lucky decision. We had been sauntering along for some time when, topping a rise, a most amazing scene confronted us. Instinctively we dropped to knee and took cover behind a bunch of scrub. Away below us was a tableau such as we, in all our experience, had never witnessed before. It was not so much a tableau as a pantomime, at least, it was pantomime enough to us watchers.

There was a smooth slope of sand down there and naked girls were being rolled slowly and methodically down the slope. When they reached the foot they were dragged to their feet, rushed to the top, and again rolled slowly and solemnly down. The performance went on without cessation. Again and again the nude girls were trundled down the soft drift of sand. A girl would lie prone on the ground at the head of the slope, with her hands pressed to her sides, and with an elderly woman following her and guiding the progress,

would roll down to the foot. There must have been a score of girls undergoing this treatment, each with an old woman in attendance. A bunch of Arabs sat smoking nearby, watching, apparently unmoved by this strange performance.

"Waal! Egypt's Queen! Can you beat that!" whispered Bain, hoarsely. "It reminds me of how I used to play roly-poly when I was a kid in skirts. But we did it for the fun of the game. This bunch is as solemn as a village sexton. Whaddya know, Skipper?"

"It looks like some religious rite," quoth I.

The Skipper shook his head.

"It's a new one on me, but I'm pretty certain it isn't any religious ceremony. I never knew an Eastern rite in which the men folk didn't take a part. This is something different, and we've got to find out . . . what."

"Say! Those girls being trundled about the sand are not Arabs. And if I'm any judge, Skipper, they're young kids—in their early teens."

Bain was right. The girls were very young, too pale-skinned for Arabians.

"Armenians, perhaps?"

"So what!"

"Exactly, Bain. The kids are Christians and this is some dirty game evolved out of the Moslem mentality . . ."

The Skipper broke off. And then:

"Listen, you fellows, we've got to find out what this is all about. That means trailing this bunch as soon as they move on. The nearest habitation I know of is Amasrah, a matter of three or four miles. I've never had the patrol there. It would be interesting

to give the place the once-over. It's almost certain these people will make their way to Amasrah when they've finished this pantomime. If I had the patrol following them they'd smell a rat. Don't want anything like that to happen. This is the scheme. You cut back to camp, Digger, and put Baronov in charge. Tell him we are trailing this bunch of women and that we'll probably make for Amasrah. He can bring the patrol up at leisure and camp about a couple of miles south of the town. We'll pick 'em up later."

I made my way back to the camp. Baronov, a Cossack, was a reliable fellow and had been picked out on one or two occasions by the Skipper for special duty. It did not take the fellow long to grasp the situation. Moreover, he happened to be specially interested in the Armenians, for he, himself, was a native of Georgia, a state which lies south of the Caucasus and adjacent to Armenia. I noticed the big fellow's eyes flash and his scrubby jowl set at the mention of those girls whom we had taken to be Armenians. Then, after instructing the patrol, I doubled back, wondering whether the roly-poly performance, as he of the silky black beard termed it, would be ended, and if I should have to trek much before picking up the Skipper and Bain.

I reached the spot to find they had moved off, but not very far. Within half a mile I came up with the strange party. Both the Skipper and Bain had joined them! That would be easy enough for Armstrong, since he was in perfect command of the Arabian dialects, and could pose as a wandering Bedouin. Doubtless friend Bain was acting the dumb wallah. Anyway, I decided that to show myself might be awkward. I was

happy enough to keep in the background for the moment.

Already we were in sight of Amasrah. Once inside that desert town and the rest would be simple. Apparently the Skipper had been able to make friendly overtures with the Arabs. I could see his gesticulating hands and could guess his game as he trudged along with the group.

When we joined the jostling people of the streets I was able to get within hearing distance. My own knowledge of Arabic by this time was sufficient for me to snatch the essentials of the story. To say I was amazed would be to put it mildly. Those young girls were not Armenians, neither were they Arabs. They were Circassians, young girls from Circassia, a district of Russia situated on the north of Mount Caucasus. Which accounts for their peculiar pallor. I know of no race so beautifully pale of skin. Many of them have features of an ivory purity and their dark eyes are emphasised by the pallor of skin until they look like pools of jet. A lovely Circassian girl is arrestingly lovely—the kind that takes one's breath away and causes a tightening of the sensory nerves. I could well imagine these Arabs being enamoured of such young beauty.

Presently the Skipper and Bain left the party and wandered into a coffee-house. This, I took it, was the signal for me to join them.

"Well, Digger, I guess you heard something of the tale?"

"I did, Skipper. We seem to have stumbled into a big job of work, eh?"

Bain grinned.

"I'll say! Didja see the girls? Gosh! They're the

loveliest things this side of Gehenna! If it hadn't been for the Skipper, I'd have given the bunch of Arab wallahs a dirty look and started something."

"*Hâsib!* Steady, Bain, steady!"

He had forgotten for the moment that we were in an Arab café, seated among men who would consider an American accent somewhat strange! I glanced round the place. It was filled with Arabians of the merchant class, wealthy of robes and head-cloths, with the curved knives of Mecca in their belts. They looked a sinister mob to me. I caught the Skipper's eye.

"Yes," he said, "this is the sort of crowd we'll have to deal with, Digger—the wallahs with the dough."

"Yeah. Waal, it's about time the patrol visited this gol-durned quarter. I guess there's a big trade in little girls around here, huh?"

"How do they get the girls here?" I asked.

"I expect the Kurds bring 'em in after looting some of the villages around the Caucasus. Come on, you fellows, let's take a stroll through the bazaar. This job isn't going to be easy. We've got to plan very carefully."

We followed the Skipper out of the coffee-house and into the streets of the bazaar quarter. There was the usual vociferous crowd, the same old smells, the familiar cries. One Eastern bazaar is much the same as another. But in this one we had an experience that might be termed unique. The three of us were standing before a booth filled with all sorts of ancient and modern firearms, knives and sabres, when a venerable-looking old man, with thick white hair and beard and clean brown face, pushed between us and asked whether

one of us would like to buy a beautiful girl . . . white . . . smooth . . . like the Christians.

I never saw anyone look less like a slave dealer than that clean, kindly-looking old man. It appeared that he had seen the Skipper in the company of the Arabs and the Circassian girls, and had guessed he was interested. His name was Abd Adin. There was a beautiful girl at his house whom he could no longer afford to keep. He told us the price at which such girls were selling just then. The average seemed to be equivalent to about 200 dollars! He begged us to come along and see the loveliness of this girl for ourselves.

We went. It looked as if there were a very big trade in girls in this desert town on the rim of civilisation. It was, in fact, the furthest north the patrol had travelled up to that time, and with each passing moment we became more convinced of the colossal task before us. There was nothing here akin to the slave traffic of Mecca and other places in southern Arabia. There the slave-selling was conducted openly and the slaves were mainly Africans—a trade which, even to-day, the world condones. And, in any case, we had no authority in those regions.

This trade in Amasrah, however, was entirely different. Apart from being a criminal offence, it was a slave trade that appeared to be concerned only with the sale of Christian girls. We had known that such transactions were sometimes conducted in secret. There was the case of Zara's sister. But here, in this little town in the extreme north of Arabia, the trade had developed. A little more freedom, a little more scope, and these people would be conducting the sales openly in the bazaars!

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The old man, Abd Adin, showed us into his house and bade us be seated. He gave us scented tea in tiny glasses and offered us a smoking hookah. He was indeed a very affable old rascal.

Presently he clapped his hands. An old crone appeared. The two held converse. The old woman disappeared and returned within a few minutes, leading a young girl by the hand. She was hardly more than a child, as lovely as one could wish, but with a vacant, stupid look in her dark eyes. She was wearing a scanty robe of black silk, which emphasised, and was intended to emphasise, the marked pallor of her shapely limbs and her small oval face. Her hair was like her eyes, black. It fell about her shoulders in a luxuriant tumble and with a weird sheen, as if one stared at it through cigarette smoke. She stood before us utterly bored, or utterly dense. I could not say which.

Armstrong spoke to her in Arabic. She shook her head. He tried again and again in various dialects. The old man just sat, watching and chuckling. The Skipper tried in Turkish, in French. He succeeded in Russian. The girl revealed the fact that the father she remembered was a Russian of Kaspex and her mother a Circassian.

When he asked how she had found her way to Amasrah, a sickening look of horror came into her face. The jet black pools were glazed with terror. Several moments elapsed before she had regained control of herself. Then the whole story came out. She was but one of many girl victims of a bandit raid on her village. She had been carried off to the mountains with the rest. They had, inevitably, become the playthings of

the Kurdish outlaws. When the Kurds had grown tired of them, they were conveyed to these Arab towns of the north and sold. Some of the khans, she said, took a number of the girls, but only to prepare them for sale again. She asserted that she had been quite happy with the old man, Abd Adin. He was not rough in his love, but gentle, as befits a very old man. If she must leave him—would the sheik be gentle with her? Abd Adin was sorry that she would never be with child for him.

She asserted strenuously that that was not her fault. There were other things she said, in a much more intimate strain. For this child victim of men's thirst for loot and lust had sunk beyond a sense of shame. She was neither child nor woman. She was at once stupid and cunning. She was supremely lovely. Her age, she said, was twelve. She looked older than that. Mentally, she had stopped growing. No wonder. Her experiences should have broken her utterly. It is astonishing just how much the human make-up, mental and physical, can stand.

All this she had told the Skipper in Russian—which language the old man could not understand. To our astonishment Skipper Armstrong actually agreed to purchase the girl. Abd Adin had asked whether we would care to see the child without her robe, but Armstrong cut the parleying short. He was satisfied. He made only one condition—that Abd Adin should himself conduct the girl to our camp.

With the girl heavily veiled and the old man trudging along beside her, we set out to find the camp of the patrol. Abd Adin was thoroughly deceived. How could he possibly know that he was walking right into the camp of the desert police? In less than an hour we

had come upon the tents of the patrol. Abd Adin was visibly impressed. With such a large and prosperous-looking camp, and so well-dressed and well-mounted a band, the sheik must be wealthy!

It was not until the old man had been placed under guard that he realised there was something amiss. Naturally he voiced his indignation. The Skipper, having got all the information he wanted from Abd Adin, regarding the other slave dealers and the whereabouts of their houses, was content to explain to the old man that he was then a prisoner, was in fact in the hands of the Irak Desert Patrol, and that there was no chance of escape.

In other circumstances the breaking up of that benevolent-looking old soul would have been pathetic, but at the time we were too busy to worry about the pathos of a wretched and foolish old man. We had work to do.

At sunset about fifty of the patrol were lined up—which left a round dozen, including the *oont-wallahs* who looked after the camels, and the guard—to attend to Abd Adin and the girl. The Skipper addressed the patrol at length. They were all to proceed, with arms well hidden, to a rendezvous in the town of Amasrah. They must approach the place in small groups and from different directions, so as not to arouse any suspicions as to their motive. Arrived at the place of meeting, they would find a gathering of the more wealthy sheiks engaged in slave trading. The slaves were mainly white girls, Christians of the Circassian persuasion. They must do nothing until he gave the signal. Until they heard that signal they would move peacefully among the dealers and buyers.

Tasks were allotted to various groups. One group would take no part whatever in any skirmish which might ensue, for they would be held responsible for every girl slave and her safe custody to the camp. Other groups were to follow the commands of their particular leader. Besides the Skipper, the leaders would include Bain, Baronov, a Wahabi named Saudi, and myself. On arrival at the rendezvous, each group would seek out its own leader and keep within call. Neither the Chief Khan of the town nor the local police would be called upon. We were to carry out the job ourselves and call upon the local guards afterwards.

It was fairly obvious, of course, that local authority in Amasrah could not be trusted in an affair of this kind. They must have known that this slave trading was going on within their gates. In short, there was much graft among the powers-that-be in that little desert town. We had first to show our might, and then make our demands.

The sections of the patrol were dispersed at intervals, the leaders being the last to leave the camp. Darkness had descended when we passed within the gates of Amasrah once more. The Skipper and Baronov went forward and Bain, Saudi and I followed. We had been going in this straggling sort of fashion for some time, passing through the jostling throngs of the market-places and on towards a more select quarter of the town, when I became aware of two heavily-robed figures behind us. I had the fancy that they were keeping me in sight, and said as much to Bain.

"Yeah. I get you. They are not of our mob. Mebbe they're just curious. Mebbe something more. We've gotta make sure, Digger."

"What d'you say, Saudi?"

"I think we stop next turning . . . and wait."

"Good."

We did. We could hear the shuffling feet beginning to hurry as if, having seen us round the bend, they were anxious to catch up so as to keep us in sight.

"We'd better tackle them as soon as they come up," said I. "Don't give them a chance to draw knives in this dark, straggling alley."

My two companions murmured assent. A few seconds more and the two stalking figures had blundered straight into us as they shot the bend in the lane. I struck without hesitation. A knife slithered into the dirt. The Arab gasped, cursed, tottered crazily at the unexpectedness of the blow.

There was hardly a sound as we closed with the strangers. I have but a hazy recollection of that incident. I remember stumbling and taking a header on to the prone Arab. Instinctively I gripped his throat, felt the rough bearded stuff of his leathery neck, and then began to pound him with the butt of my Mauser. And even as I struck, I recognised the fellow. I recognised the flattened, broken nose and the half-closed eyes. He was one of the group who had chattered so much to Armstrong about the sale of slaves fixed for this very evening, one of the group who had escorted the girls back from that sanded slope to the town of Amasrah. . . .

We dragged the pair of them into a nearby courtyard and left them to recover in peace. That, we knew, would be a matter of hours. But here was a problem. Had these two scallywags been told off to watch for our approach? They had slunk behind us

—knife in hand! Were they then out to prevent our attending the sale? Were we, in fact, strangers under suspicion?

News travels quickly in an Eastern bazaar. Had our dealings with Abd Adin leaked out? If he had been sought by some other Arabian, and had been told by the old crone that strangers had taken him and the girl to a camp beyond the gates . . . I gave voice to my thoughts.

"Mebbe," opined Bain. "In which case, this li'l' expedition is going to be livelier than we reckoned on, huh?"

Just then a shrill whistle rent the air. We sprang forward, racing along the darkened lane like hares, with our *abbas* tucked under our arms and sandalled feet scattering the dust. Bain was chuckling like a schoolboy. He was happy to be in the scrum. I never knew such a tiger for a fight. He was a positive glutton. I cannot say that I was unhappy about the affair myself. However. . . .

We caught sight of the Skipper a few yards ahead of us. He beckoned, then disappeared with Baronov through the doorway of a high-walled courtyard. We followed. Immediately we found ourselves among a gathering of natives. Some were standing idly in groups. Others sauntering about, chatting in loud voices. A long stone bench ran down one wall of the courtyard. The biggest group of men stood before this and stared, stared hard at the girls seated there in a row—like children at school.

The Arabian gentlemen were eyeing these "goods" critically. Some of the girls sat stolidly, indifferent to the leers and comments of the prospective buyers.

Others had not reached the nonchalant stage. They were afraid. There was anxiety in their wistful eyes. trembling fear on soft baby mouths. They numbered a score, the same girls whom we had seen at noon that day being rolled solemnly down a sanded slope. Not one of them had reached the age of twenty, and a few were hardly more than half that age. They were all fair-skinned children, shapely, well-nourished if not content, with their high virgin breasts and that bearing of premature adolescence common to young girls of the East. Slaves indeed!

I wandered about in the vicinity of this bench, for it happened that my section of the patrol was responsible for the safety of this bunch of child-women. After the first sight of them I tried not to stare. The picture of them gave me an uneasy feeling, as if I were committing an outrage against some natural law. Yet, there was something terribly fascinating about those half-clothed girls, some cruel instinct in the man-beast that compelled one's eyes to turn and feast on their helpless loveliness. . . .

I noticed that my fellow leaders had taken up their positions and that the sections while appearing to stroll idly were in fact "standing by." And then I had no time for more. The chattering, gesticulating figures turned their eyes towards the stone bench. A tall stately, even scholarly-looking Arab, had taken his stand before the bench. He was about to offer the "goods" for sale. As friend Bain would have it, that was the signal to start something.

I walked up to the auctioneer, shoved the muzzle of my Mauser in his belly, and told him in plain, but loud-voiced Arabic, that he was under arrest. I



[Photo : Associated Press, Ltd.
"A TALL, STATELY, EVEN SCHOLARLY-LOOKING ARAB. . . ."]

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announced the presence of the Fourteenth Patrol and warned him and his brethren that resistance would be useless. There was dead silence for a split second. But hardly had my words died away when hell broke loose in that courtyard.

The girls screamed when they saw the concerted rush towards me. I did not even turn round, though a knife might have found my spine at any moment. But the Skipper had said—"Keep your man covered, and keep your eyes on the girls."

I heard the Skipper's voice bawling in Russian above the din and tumult and I guessed he was warning the girls to remain where they were, and assuring them that we were police and would look to their safety. My section closed round the girls. Baronov's group were at my back. I could hear his voice directing the men, could hear the shots, the blows, the scrape of knives, the hoarse, raucous cries of the trapped natives as they fought. All this I could hear. I dared not turn round to see what was happening. The tall, scholarly-looking Arabian and I stared at each other. His thin, ascetic face blanched. His eyes blazed with venomous hate of these interfering infidels. But he never moved.

One of the Wahabis came forward and hurriedly fixed a halter round the fellow's neck. The girls, still screaming, were crouching together like frightened lambs on that stone ledge. The noise of the mêlée was deafening. The Moslem brethren were yelling the curses of Allah upon their adversaries, yelps of pain mingled with frightened shrieks filled the air. I knew that if we did not get clear very soon we should have the whole town at our heels. Shots rang out, knives

hurtled through the air. Then the figure of a brawny Arab came crashing down at my feet, thrown by some more powerful combatant, and very nearly knocked me off my balance.

By this time I was free to glance about. My section had rounded up the girls and the would-be auctioneer was securely tied up. I was looking for a way out. It was my allotted task to get these girls out of the crazy mob and somehow down to the camp. I saw that the natives were being driven slowly towards a further corner of the yard. The patrol was literally hacking a passage for my charges so that we might rush them through in safety. The moment came when we were able to break through.

In a few seconds we were out of the courtyard and hurrying the weeping, shivering, terrified girls through the darkened streets. I have tackled some queer jobs in different parts of the globe, but never one quite so weird as that. I had a dozen men and a score of little refugees, to say nothing of the troublesome slave dealer; so that our progress was not as swift as I could have wished!

Moreover, we were by no means out of the treacherous wood, or rather, desert town. As we ran along the dim alleys the stillness of the late night hour was broken by the cries and shots from that courtyard. Curious folk were rushing from their houses towards the scene. Perhaps it was the din of that fighting that saved our little party, for the curious were too intent on reaching the scene to pay much attention to us as we hurriedly brushed aside the gathering mob.

At last we were out of the gates and trekking in more or less orderly fashion towards the camp. We soon

had our charges fixed up and the prisoner under guard. Then we had the pleasant task of waiting with arms ready for the return of the remainder of the patrol, and whatever captures they could make.

We did not have long to wait. They came in regular marching order, bringing a goodly band of prisoners with them. It was dawn before that night's work had been cleared up. Not till then was I able to gather anything like a clear account of what had resulted from the raid. We had taken some fifty prisoners, almost one for each member of the patrol, had not sustained any losses, and few serious injuries.

Daylight broke over the strangest sort of camp—desert police, grinning and happy, it is true, in torn and blood-stained *burnous*, prisoners of a comic variety, some in the flowing garb of merchants, others in scanty *thawb* or loin cloth, all tied cheek by jowl in hateful juxtaposition, and a group of young girls looking upon the scene in dazed wonderment.

The Skipper had gone back to the town, which was now quiet and subdued, to seek out the Chief Khan and his guards. He had no trouble, we later learned, in making a cowed Khan realise the gravity of the situation, nor in securing the necessary rations and transport to get our party to headquarters at Ramadi.

Naturally the girls came in for much attention during the historic journey to Ramadi. There was not a man in the patrol who could have refrained from helping towards their comfort and well-being.

It was not until we had got under way that we discovered the meaning of that exercising down the sand slope to which the girls had been subjected, and

which had caused us to investigate in the first place. Then it was the girls themselves who explained. In brief, that compulsory game of roly-poly down the sand track was the Arabian chief's idea of beauty treatment!

We were tickled to death with the explanation. The girls told us how they had been fed for weeks on the finest food procurable. Nay; fattened—fattened for sale, so to speak. The Arab's idea of beauty, of course, is that a woman, whether tall or short, should be able to display a goodly presence fore and aft. But mere fat is not enough. It must be shapely. Rolling a body in sand seems a crude method of massaging. But in this primitive quarter it was the crude method that had to serve often enough. As Bain remarked, his eye roving over our little party of attractive refugees:

“Why, back home there'd be a fortune in that idea for beauty massage!”

CHAPTER XV

THAT WITCH, RADNOWITZ

I PLUNGED blindly through the plantation and on towards a clearing where stood the dilapidated house I was seeking. It was an eerie, awe-inspiring sort of place, especially at that hour of the night, or rather, early morning. A fitful moon gave me the shadowy outline of the building. There was no light showing anywhere.

In my somewhat stimulated condition I don't know whether I was fully capable of appreciating the madness of that lone adventure. Not that I was drunk. A certain amount of liquor had passed my lips, it is true; and if I were not as sober as a judge, I certainly felt as fearless as—well, as one does after dining and wining well. The fact was, I had grown unaccustomed to the use of liquor at that time. The patrol worked hard and lived hard, and the fare was of the simplest. Looking back on the incident, however, I think I should still have embarked upon it, and alone, even had I been cold stone sober.

Moreover, though it were many moons since I had been kidnapped by that Jezebel, Olga Radnowitz, I could still feel the hurt of humiliation whenever she was mentioned, still experience that perfectly human desire to get my own back. Here was my opportunity. Drunk or sober, I was determined to get even with the witch.

I went forward to investigate—and pulled up sharply, staring into a pair of fixed, glassy eyes. There was the vague outline of a huge, ash-coloured hound. It was barring my path. It stood firm, motionless as rock, as if, indeed, it were made of rock. Its great feet and legs were widely spread. Nothing about the animal seemed alive, save the hateful eyes and the bared fangs.

I fancy I swallowed hard, wondering whether my eyes were playing tricks on me, whether the wine fumes were just a little more potent than I had realised. Was this thing a stone ornament of the garden, a figment of the imagination, a phantom?

But, phantom or not, it should not stay my errand. I remember moving my hand slowly towards the Mauser-butt—and as slowly dropped it again. I dared not. The crack of a gun in that deadly quietude would certainly betray my presence and ruin everything. I was to be the kidnapper this time, and Madame Radnowitz the kidnapped. I could not afford to risk the slightest sound if I was to succeed in the task I had set myself.

Damn the beast! Were we to stare at each other until the dawn? A mere dog to stop me! It was too comic!

It was real enough. I saw then the trembling movement of the lolling tongue. But the eyes never moved. Nor did mine. I remember thinking of a story I had been told when I was a kid. It was a story supposed to illustrate the fact that if one could out-stare a tiger or a lion, the beast would slink away. So I kept my eyes as fixed and immobile as that hound's. I don't know just how long we stood thus, that beast and I, but we must have presented a crazy picture in the

light of that shadowy moon. It was no good. The beast was not to be out-stared.

It made no sound. It was as cunning as the devil. There was something grotesque, uncanny, about this beast that would not bark. At last I took a tentative step. The muscles of the thing tautened, his head shooting forward, though his feet remained firm on the ground.

With a snort of impatience, I sprang forward, determined to end this farce one way or the other. Simultaneously the beast leapt. My hands shot up to meet his out-spread claws. Then I had the shock of my life. His lunging weight sent me down to the ground with a crash. God in heaven! What a weight he was! He must have turned the scale at all of 150 pounds.

That weight up against me was so totally unexpected that I lost my breath for several anxious seconds. The mad brute sank his teeth in the thick stuff of the *abba* over my right shoulder. My right arm was pinned under me, while I struck at him with my left fist. But I might just as well have tickled him with a fly-flapper for all the effect my blows had on his thick hide.

I clutched at one of the brute's legs, got a firm grip on the stout member, and began to thrust it backwards. I heaved with all my strength, managed to throw the beast off my chest, so that the shoulder he was gnawing came uppermost, and though his teeth were lacerating the flesh I pressed the shoulder down on his jaw, while continuing to push back his foreleg.

His leg snapped. I could feel the sickening scrape of bone under my hand. And all the time a nauseating dog-smell filled my nostrils, a hateful, putrid stench.

The beast did not even yelp, though the breaking of his foreleg must have given him excruciating pain. I groped for the gun, still pressing my torn shoulder against the beast's jaw. Then I became as big a beast as he. I began to pound him with the Mauser-butt. I must have been stark, raving mad for a space, for I was still pounding at his skull long after he lay stiff.

I sat up after a while, and was violently sick. What with the wine fumes and the stench of that brute's breath in me . . . I got to my feet, mopping the sweat and dirt from my face, gazing at that still body and wondering what sort of nightmare was this. There was a timeless period when I could not recall why I was there—in that garden of weeds, rubble and filth. . . .

Presently I readjusted my clothing and made a cautious way towards the building. The moon was fading. A wisp of light cloud was breaking over the sky. Soon it would be dawn. I must hurry.

Breaking into the house presented no difficulties. It was all as quiet as the grave. It might well have been the house of the dead. Was this a fool's errand on which I had embarked? Did the place have no other occupant save that mad dog?

I had brought a flash-light with me. I had searched two of the rooms and was hesitating at the door of a third, when a voice from the room cried out: "Who is there?" The query was made in Arabic. But there was no doubt about the voice. I shall be a very old man when I fail to recognise that voice. Olga Radnowitz for a certainty!

I crashed into the room. There was no further need for caution. A lamp she had just lighted illuminated

her presence. The sheer beauty of her has always been something of a shock to me. She was beautiful then, arrestingly beautiful as she stood by the couch from which she had just risen. In my eyes she was more beautiful every time I saw her. Damn the woman! I never knew such a one.

"You!" she breathed.

She stood there like a statue, tragedy in the set of her classic Hebrew features, something of magnetism in her great dark eyes, the thick masses of black hair fallen about her powerful, perfectly moulded shoulders.

She laughed—and something reached deep down inside me, setting a whole chord of nerves jangling. How a man must hate such a woman to keep from loving her!

"It is the English policeman . . . with body so white and face so handsome, so brown. . . ."

"You can cut all that out," I said, displaying the Mauser. "It is my turn now. I've been waiting for this moment. You are my prisoner."

She laughed again. Then her full-lipped mouth rounded and she gave three sharp, peculiar whistles. Then I laughed.

"Useless," said I. "I've fixed your dog—the brute!"

"You have killed him!" she spat.

"We fought. He lost."

She came nearer, saw the blood-soaked cloth of my shoulder, touched it with her hand. She looked at the blood on her fingers. Then swiftly wiped the hand across my jaw. I stepped back and shoved out the gun. She stood for a quivering minute and bit off a few choice oaths. This raging beauty could be as foul as the foulest.

And while she cursed she spat—like the dirtiest gutter brat. In a flash the woman's hand flew to the back of her neck, as if she had suddenly been struck there. I was momentarily taken aback—until I saw the gleam of the knife. . . .

I have wondered since whether that woman knew, by instinct, that I could not shoot her in cold blood. She certainly took no account of the gun. I might not have been covering her at all. She was that sort of woman. She defied all the established laws of attack and defence. Maybe she had stared into so many gun-muzzles that they had ceased to make any impression on her. . . .

Maybe it was her intention that this should be the end for both of us. Of course, I could not shoot her at such close quarters. I might, in other circumstances, have attempted to wing a woman, render her incapable of using the knife. As it was, I just fought and struggled with her, tried to shake the knife from her hand, remonstrated with her, reiterated that she was under arrest. But she was not the sort of woman to respond to anything of that kind.

Perhaps, after the fight with her dog, to say nothing of the revelry that had preceded that struggle, I was not feeling too good. And what man likes fighting a woman, even a she-cat like Olga Radnowitz? To fight first a ferocious dog that stank, and then turn round to fight such a woman, to be conscious of that intoxicating perfume, that struggling form so utterly feminine yet full of an incredible strength. . . . One is human, after all.

The crazy struggle went on and on. The light of day flooded the room, dimming the lamp with its

radiance. There was a stumble and a crash, and Olga's head struck the floor as I crashed with her. She lay still, a crumpled heap, out for the count. Stupidly, perhaps, I began to shake her. The fall had stunned the beautiful creature. I lifted her, no light-weight, and placed her on the divan.

She would be all right for a minute, I thought. I might look round this wretched house. I had vague ideas of securing a piece of rope to tie her up. By the sheerest accident I had made her captive, and now I did not know what to do with her. It did not occur to me then that there might be someone else in that weird abode, some servant, some bodyguard of hers. I made no attempt to revive her—then. I just stared at the lovely, inert thing. She looked . . . almost peaceful, if such a vivid, virile creature ever could look that way—except in death.

It was daylight now. The morning sun was beginning to climb. I searched the place from top to bottom. There was not a soul anywhere. When I returned to Olga she was still lying prone, motionless, save for the gentle rise and fall of her ample breasts. While she lay thus I trussed her. Then I dipped a piece of cloth in water and bound the cold compress about her forehead, chafed her hands, gave her some spirit from my flask. . . . Lord in heaven, I thought, has she lived here alone with only that brute of a hound. It didn't seem like the Madame Radnowitz I knew. Something mysterious about all this.

My plan was to revive her and leave her to recover. She could hardly get away. I would return to the patrol and report to the Skipper. No use trying to take the witch back myself. I could not very well carry her,

and she would not be dragged along, even with her arms bound. Nor did I wish to create a sensation in the streets of Baghdad.

I saw her eyelids flicker. I did not wait for more but rose to my feet, locked the door of the room as I passed out, and stumbled out of the house into the glare of the sun.

What a night, thought I, beginning with revels and ending with—a slaughtered dog and a woman out for the count. Only a few hours ago the patrol had been celebrating in one of Baghdad's new restaurants, celebrating the safe arrival into the capital of a bunch of prisoners from Amasrah, for every one of which we received an award, and the handing over of a party of girl refugees to the French Convent.

We were in the midst of these revels when I was called out. Friend Zara, then engaged in espionage work in the area, had taken me aside and whispered that she knew the precise whereabouts of one, Olga Radnowitz. Immediately I had declared my intention of making a lone adventure of it. I neither wished to disturb the patrol in its merry-making, nor did I require help.

That then was my mood. Zara had insisted on being my guide. She it was who had brought me through the maze of alleys and lanes to this desolate spot. I had insisted that she go back. I had watched until she was out of sight and sound before I entered the plantation that encircles this house of mystery.

I found that she had not gone back, at least, not very far. I was made aware of that when I very nearly tripped over a body as it lay near the trunk of a tree in that same plantation of mystery.

"Digger!" she said, and I knew that things were not too bad.

There was a nasty gash in her temple. Blood was trickling down.

"Zara! What has happened? You said you would go back. . . ."

She sat up while I bathed her head. She was smiling. She was making an obvious effort to pull herself together. An astonishing woman, this Zara, and a tough one.

"You said go-back-and-I-did-go-back."

Hers was a mischievous smile, in spite of the throbbing head.

"But what happened?"

"I waited for you to return, Digger. You were so long. I could not rest. I thought I would walk a little way. Perhaps I could help after you had got the woman out of the house. But you were so long. Only I knew where you had gone. Was it not I who had sent you? So I walked until I had reached the plantation again. I was waiting here, wondering if I should go to the house. Daylight was breaking. I could not have missed you on the way. You must still be at the house. That was how I was thinking when . . . when I was struck from behind. I fell. I was very sick. But I saw the man running through the trees. He wore brown *burnous* with marks like a sunblind. . . . Digger! What did you do with the woman, Radnowitz?"

I jumped to my feet.

"Was that man running towards the house?"

"But, yes! What did you do with the woman?"

"I left her there—trussed up. I thought to go back to the patrol and get some men to come for her. There

was no one in the house. . . . I must go back. . . . That fellow will find her. . . .”

“Hurry, Digger, hurry!”

“I can’t leave you here! Can you walk?”

“Go! Go! I am all right. Leave me. You must go! Even now, that man who struck me, he may have set the woman, Radnowitz, free.”

I did not wait for more but took to my heels and raced back to the house. I met no one. The door stood wide open and I blundered in. There I stopped to regain breath. The same death-like stillness pervaded the place. There was no sound save my own hurried breathing. I went cautiously forward. If the stranger who struck from behind were still around. . . . That fellow had seen the dog, maybe, and had jumped to wrong conclusions. . . .

Reaching the room in which I had left Olga Radnowitz, I thrust the door wide open, and remained on the threshold, cursing my stupidity. The room was empty. A piece of rope lay on the divan where I had trussed up the she-devil. She was gone! She was gone again! For the third time she had got away. That lithe, bewitching cat had slipped her leash once more.

I searched the house again. I knew it was hopeless, but I stumbled on, from room to room, wondering if I looked a bigger fool than I felt. The witch was as slippery as an eel, and she had the devil’s own luck. She had gone, leaving no sign, for the rooms were in just the same state of lived-in disorder as before. There had been no attempt to remove anything. Olga had decided that the patrol was a little too close for her comfort and had taken the opportunity to slip

away provided for her by that mysterious stranger, whoever he was. The pair of them must have been making their getaway while I was talking to Zara.

Well, that was that. There was nothing to do then but just stroll back to patrol headquarters. I made my way through the grounds again, came upon the carcase of a stinking dog, searched around in case someone was lurking behind a tree with a present for me. But no. The pretty bird had certainly flown.

I picked up Zara.

"Gone!" she said.

She wasn't asking a question so much as stating a fact. I nodded. There didn't seem anything more to say. We fell into step and proceeded on our way through the tortuous streets towards the centre of the city, where the patrol was temporarily quartered.

"But, Digger," she queried, "how will you explain? When you see Armstrong Sahib he will wonder at your torn *abba* and the bruise in your shoulder."

"I shan't explain," I said, shortly, "and for God's sake, Zara, don't mention to the Skipper, or anyone in the patrol, that I have been trying to capture this damned Radnowitz woman again!"

The girl gave me a queer look, shook her head, sighed.

"I understand, Digger."

We walked on for a space. Then:

"But what will you say, Digger? You must explain your absence," she persisted.

"Call it a drunken brawl, I guess."

CHAPTER XVI

MAHRILYA HAD AMBITIONS

IN that Eastern dancing-hell the smoke from cigarettes and bubbling hookahs, mingling with the fetid breath of sweating natives, thickened and soured the atmosphere. The place was filled with men, squatting on low benches, scantily garbed for the most part, though here and there the richer robes of a wealthy bazaar merchant could be seen.

Over all was the heavy drone of tongues as men chattered of the delights they were to witness. On the brown faces, shining with perspiration, anticipation gleamed. Black eyes shone. White teeth glittered in the beards of Baghdadi, Persian, Kurd and Jew. This hall of pleasure, or vice, according to the temperament of the onlooker, was the nethermost Gehenna, a secret retreat by night for Arabs and others, not excluding Europeans, whose perverted appetites must be appeased.

A glaring canopy of coloured lights illumined garish decorations. Bazaar merchant, grizzled warrior, and labourer of the date groves sat cheek by jowl, waiting for the coming of Mahrilya, the alluring little dancer of the supple, honey-coloured limbs, whose eyes were of black velvet, whose hair was as sombre as a moonless night, whose dancing aroused the hot passions of these natives of Arabia's Northern Heights.

Life atop of Arabia is not merely different. It is a life apart. Europe, the West, were a million miles

away. In that land of sensual beauty, racial mysticism and religious fatalism, things are never what they seem. Such an experience as this could be realised by the senses but hardly explained, remembered thrills that cannot always be put into words.

When the flutes and drums and weird stringed instruments wailed and moaned and throbbed, when Mahrilya danced—nothing was the same in mere man's heated vision. Just then, while she pirouetted on a raised dais in the centre of that crazy gathering, strange things happened to one. It seemed that something deep down within me whirled in unison with the flash and quiver of the girl's flying body. My blood throbbed to the thud of the drums. I was ready for anything then—"ready to be anything in the ecstasy of being ever."

We drank sparingly. Our presence there was a matter of stern business. Zara, who knew most secret retreats of this area, had told us of the place, of Mahrilya and the possibility of getting a line on the mysterious disappearance of a youngster from an Air Force detachment. She knew nothing definitely, save that the young officer had been seen on one occasion hanging over Mahrilya's gharry in the bazaar, chatting to the girl. We realised that that might mean everything, or nothing. . . .

But if that young officer, fresh from home, had crept away from quarters one night to feast his eyes on this. . . . There were many varieties of intoxication here. But undoubtedly Mahrilya was the chief one. It was the atmosphere of her dancing, the girl's dancing rather than the girl, that intoxicated. I understood better then just what these natives sought.

They told strange tales about her, some of which could not be repeated in the language I use. One of them was told solemnly and with reverent allusions to Allah. It was to the effect that Allah had visited Mahrilya as she reposed in the womb and that she had danced, always she had danced. Wise-looking old men, bearded patriarchs, and pale-faced youths, all repeated this tale to each other as we sat among them, repeated it with the innocent credulity of children. Perhaps, after all, it was no more than one could expect from a people whose heaven was inhabited by lovely women. The Moslem religion has always been a source of amazement to me. Not without materialistic tenets, it is convenient enough to hold out promises to the passionate.

It happened that I had seen this Mahrilya before, divorced, as it were, from her dancing. I had seen her passing through the bazaar in her gaily-upholstered gharry. She had seemed nothing more than a slothful beauty, reclining on silken cushions like a sleepy cat, a lazy smile in her velvet eyes. To see her thus, the fire and passion of her dancing all gone, was to wonder why one had experienced that peculiar intoxication. . . .

But while she danced, crazy thoughts careered through the mind, wild impulses rippled the nerves. It was necessary to exercise the greatest restraint. Under those coloured lights, the gleaming, whirling figure became the centre of a blind world of tormented emotions. She was not a girl any more, but a spirit trying to appease some torturing desire. Such was her amazing power that all around her were infected by the madly-leaping spirit. Men rose to their feet and

yelled in raucous voices. This little sprite, this will-o'-the-wisp, had the power to spread sensuous excitement over a throng of grown men, diffuse it wave upon wave.

She flew faster and faster. She was a winged insect trying to escape. She was an imprisoned spirit battling for freedom. And as she whirled and flew the great jewelled ruby clamped to the exposed diaphragm caught the scintillating lights and made a blood-red circle around her. Such a picture played the very devil with the imaginative mind. One saw her then as Vishnu's ironic reincarnation, conceived in a moment of contempt for the weakness of man.

I turned my eyes from her to the crowd of hot, excited eyes and streaming brown faces, and for seconds I wondered what had brought me to this crazy corner of the earth. It was a remote world in which I dwelt then, yet to-day it remains a thousand times more vivid than any other I know. Even Bain, squatting at a table by my side, Bain the blasé, the cynical, the vagabond who had wandered throughout the reaches of two hemispheres, who had hob-nobbed with counts, bums and riffraff, even he was visibly moved. He saw my look and grinned.

"Gosh! Mata Hari had nothing on this!"

And then it was all over. Suddenly she had leapt from the dais into the arms of a brawny native and was swept from the room to the accompaniment of bellowing cries and hoarse yelling for more.

"Well," snapped the Skipper, "now that the little lady has had her play, we'd better cut along and see how she spends her off-duty hours. I don't imagine there'll be anything more from the prettature to-night."

I came to earth with a bump. During Mahrilya's dancing I had quite forgotten about the mysterious affair of the young officer. I had more than a suspicion, too, that both the Skipper and Bain had allowed our mission there to temporarily slip from their minds. That little wisp of femininity certainly had the power to make one forget. If the young air officer had fallen for her. . . . One could at least appreciate his feelings!

Skipper Armstrong's command, however, was an essential cold douche. Mentally I shook myself. A patrolman in the East, as elsewhere, was human, but he dared not be susceptible!

"You said it, Skipper. What's the scheme?"

"Well, now, we may be pretty sure that the girl is well guarded. We have to get inside her quarters without raising the alarm. We must investigate, make sure, one way or the other, whether there is anything to Zara's suspicions."

"You don't think we're on a wild goose chase?"

"Impossible to say, Digger."

"Why not arrest the bitch on suspicion?" queried Bain, having then recovered from her spell. "We can hush things up—supposin' we'd made a gaff."

The Skipper shook his head.

"In the present state of the populace of this area, such a move would be fatal. The authorities would have taken that step at once, without dragging us in—if they'd considered it wise to do so. No. This affair, in the present temper of the mob around here, calls for more delicate methods."

We left the den and made our way round towards the rear of the premises. We had to move warily in

those dim, sinister alleys. Suddenly the Skipper lifted his hand. We stopped dead, staring into the blackness. In a trice we dodged under the wheels of an ox wagon that stood near the wall, and lying flat under the cart, waited for what was to follow.

There was little that we could see, but we could hear. We had lain there less than a minute when we caught the sound of hurrying footsteps, and a swish of draperies. Between the wheel-spokes we could glimpse the lower half of a *sari*, pale brown ankles and tiny red slippers, followed by thick muscular legs and heavy, splayed feet. They stopped at a door within a few feet of us, and we held our breath, silent as snakes sunning in the grass.

The feet disappeared within the doorway—all except one pair, which appeared to be planted there on guard. To judge by the feet, the fellow must be something of a giant. It would be necessary to remove him before we could enter the building. That did not prove difficult. The Skipper moved forward towards the end of the wagon, slowly, an inch at a time. Bain and I followed.

Suddenly Armstrong's hand shot out, gripped the thick brown leg, and pulled with a twisting jerk. The native came down with a crash and we leapt upon him. He had been taken unawares, not expecting an attack from the direction of his feet, and we were upon him before he had time to utter a sound. It was all over in the space of seconds. We tore up the fellow's *burnous* and after binding his limbs threw him into the wagon.

We made an easy entry into the building, Armstrong leading. In that mysterious dimness I felt as if I were

on some schoolboy escapade and refrained from chuckling with difficulty. Creeping along the passages brought us to the foot of a flight of stone steps. Faint sounds came down to us, then sharp commands in a feminine voice. We started to climb. The woman's voice came clear and sharp to our ears. It gave us something of a shock to realise what she was about. We hurried forward.

The landing was dark, but the voices and a pencil of light from a door gave us the room we sought. We drew nearer. Mahrilya was talking. Moreover, she was talking in broken English. She was demanding something from some English-speaking person. In the space of a couple of minutes we had the whole diabolical story, a story of tortures being used upon some luckless devil in order to bend him to the will of the tiny but powerful Mahrilya.

This, we gathered, was the third night of torture and was to be the last. Red ants had been used on the first night—to eat their way through a necklace of dates fastened round the fellow's neck, but he had fainted; so that didn't work. The second night was as useless, apparently, for after the mechanical fan had been clamped to his jaw, to make him stutter and laugh and foam with terror, he had fainted again. Now the python was being used. We did not wait to hear more. . . .

Three hefty policemen crashed into the door and sent the crazy structure flying. God! What a tableau! There was the erstwhile Don Juan among Eastern beauties. But there was nothing of the lady-killer about him now. He was a physical wreck, bound and tied to the wall. A table had been pushed up to him

so that it pressed against his waist, and on the table was a python curled in repose, or in some sort of stupor. At any rate, its head was not even raised. Probably that was to come later, as the gruesome ten-foot reptile came out of its stupor to realise that here was something at which to strike. Slow torture indeed!

The youngster, in his stained and ragged uniform, presented a frightful picture. His eyes were glazed with terror, and his face was a greenish-yellow. He looked like a man who was about to take a header into some awful abyss. Apparently he had been ready to face these tortures and face death rather than open his mouth. The youngster certainly had guts.

The girl, Mahrilya, had jumped to her feet with a squeal as we crashed into the room. Three muscular attendants made as if to rush us, but thought better of it. For a split second there was dead silence. Then the Skipper took charge of the proceedings. With a contemptuous flick of his wrist he picked up the girl and threw her across the room at Bain.

"Hang on to that! And keep these swine covered while I cut the youngster loose."

He released the young officer, who promptly fainted. Then he turned his attention to the snake. It still lay coiled. He shot it through the head. The great length of it writhed, quivered, and was still. So much for the python. The girl, Mahrilya, was struggling, spitting and cursing, but for all the effect such a performance had on Bain she might not have been there. His grip on her arm was like a vice. He did not even look at her. He was as stolid as a country yokel, as solemn as an owl. Mata Hari indeed!

The Skipper pushed the python off the table. It flopped to the floor in a dead heap.

"You should have used this for your shoe skins, Madame," he growled.

Our leader was becoming quite garrulous.

"So you'd die rather than give them what they wanted, eh? Well done, youngster! But you should remember that these Eastern beauties are all right to look at. Deep down, they're as treacherous as hell."

The boy was staring round the room, more than a trifle dazed, making an obvious effort to take in the situation. He brushed his hand over his forehead. Staring hard at Armstrong and then from him to Bain and myself, he asked:

"But, who in God's name are you? I don't get this . . . an Arab talking pure English. . . ."

Armstrong gave one of his rare laughs.

"I expect we are a bit puzzling. We are a police patrol. The *burnous* and *haik* are just part of our uniform. My name's Armstrong. This is Bain, a transatlantic member—and the other chap, Digger Craven, originally from Down Under. . . ."

"Mine's Pearson—Lieut. Wilbur Pearson. I say! You're some of the fellows I've heard about—Secret Service Patrol?"

"That is so. Now, tell us. What happened?"

Pearson stared at each of us in turn for a space. There was a curious look in his deep blue eyes, as though what he were about to say was not exactly palatable on his tongue. He was a fair-haired, slim, wiry youth, with a three days' growth of beard on his cheeks. Normally, I imagined his face showed a

clean smooth tan. At the moment he was looking considerably the worse for wear.

"I say! I feel a frightful fool, you know. It's all my own fault. I let myself in for this. It's rather difficult to explain. I've been a bit of an ass with that . . . that bewitching creature, Mahrilya. . . ."

"I guess I wouldn't worry about her, son," commented Bain. "Just give us the lowdown on this racket."

Young Pearson looked very serious for a minute.

"This is going to ruin me," he said. "It'll ruin my whole career."

"Not a bit of it," said I. "You tell us exactly what happened and we'll fix it for you, somehow."

"Damned decent of you fellows. Fact is, I got all wound up over Mahrilya. Met her once or twice in the bazaar. You know how it is . . . a girl like that? She seemed on the level. Interestin'. Fascinatin', if you like. A bit of fun and all that, but nothing under the rose. You follow? Well, she suggested I should come along to the dive one night where she dances. I expect you chaps know all about that. Gee! But she's a dancer! And I couldn't very well say nay, when she invited me to her quarters here, could I? I mean to say, everything in the garden looked lovely. There wasn't a thing a fellow could take exception to. . . . And then, while the girl and I were swapping lessons in English and Arabic, these three native giants barged in. Before I could say Jack Robinson, I was struggling with them and that bewitching little devil was laughing. Well, you can imagine I didn't have much of a chance with these three gorillas. I was

o

strung up to the wall there. . . . Then the fun began. . . .”

Pearson glanced across at the girl. If looks could kill, Mahrilya would have died on the spot.

“Yes. We heard something of that before we broke the door down. They tried to make you talk—red ants, the fan and so on.”

The boy shivered at the recollection of what he had gone through.

“How long have you been out East?” asked Armstrong.

“Three months. . . . And now! When I report to the O.C. I shall be finished. I’ve just shown what a poor fool I can be. Heavens! How the boys at the station will laugh when they hear about it!”

“I shouldn’t worry about that, if I were you. What exactly was Mahrilya trying to get out of you?”

“The fact is, I should have told you of the yarn she spun. I fell for it. Like a bally ass, I sympathised with her. She says she’s the daughter of a Turkish gentlewoman and a British peer. It was a union that occurred during the Great War, when the British were fighting the Turks in these parts. That was in 1915 and ’16, wasn’t it? It fits in with the girl’s age, even if it doesn’t square any other way. Frankly, you fellows, I think the girl’s barmy. She’s gone quite berserk on this idea of her birth. And she has the facts all pat, so to speak. She says her mother told her the whole story just before she died—a little while ago. Now she wants to get in tow with her father. . . .”

“Did she give you the name of this English peer?” queried the Skipper.

“She certainly did. But, I say, the fellow’s alive!

He's married, you know. He has a family. I mean to say, I can't very well bandy his name about, even if all she says is just a pack of lies."

"You need have no fear on that score. But you must trust us."

"Of course. I suppose all this will go down in the report, anyway? You'll find his photograph in that cabinet over there. His name is on it. It's his own signature!"

Armstrong went over to the cabinet indicated, opened it, and took out the photograph. A smile spread over Mahrilya's face. She held out her hands towards the Skipper.

"You now take these off?"

Skipper Armstrong looked at the photograph, then at the girl, then back at the picture. He bit off half a dozen words. She quite understood that he would do nothing of the kind.

That photograph was a bit of a shock. It was the portrait of an English peer all right, and the fool had signed his name across it. Whether the girl could claim him as father was another matter. The point was, the photograph was in her possession. Armstrong, realising this, promptly stowed it away in the inner folds of his *abba*. Whereupon the girl began to curse and spit again. She raved and foamed and dragged at the cords that bound her. For the daughter of a peer, her behaviour was in the height of bad taste.

When she had quietened, the Skipper began to question her about the tale of her birth. She repeated, like a parrot, all that she had told Pearson. She certainly had the story off by heart. She had been well primed by her mother. Try as he would, the

Skipper was unable to find any flaw in the statements she made.

"What I cannot understand," he said, turning to Pearson, "is just where you come in. What have you to do with this girl's cock-and-bull story?"

"I was coming to that. You hear what she says? Her father—this English peer—is now in residence in a certain protectorate not far from Irak. When I became friendly with her, she recognised my flying kit. It gave her an idea. The scheme is that I should give my promise to help her. Apparently she was to keep up these torturing tricks of hers until I gave my solemn promise. I kept refusing, of course. I mean to say. . . ."

"For heaven's sake!" broke in Armstrong, "will you tell me what she wanted from you?"

"Oh, that's obvious, isn't it? She wanted me to pinch a 'plane. You know, *pukkerao* the Army 'plane that I'm in the habit of taking up. Then I could meet her and her bodyguard out on the *Maidan* one fine day, and away we'd fly to her father—I mean to say, to the place where her father, that is, the English peer she talks about, is living at the present time. How she knows all these things, where he's living and what he's doing, and so forth, is more than I can *mallum*. You follow me? She knows all about this English peer whom, she insists, is her father. But, I told you she was barmy."

"I see. Well, now, I am going to convey this girl and her attendants to a place of safe keeping. You can give us a hand. After that, we'll escort you back to your own quarters. Now listen carefully. Your own report must agree with mine. Your report will

be that this girl, Mahrilya, became friendly with you for a purpose. That's true enough—though you did not know it at the time. She told you her story. You naturally disbelieved it. But you thought it worth while to pursue the matter. You made an appointment to see her in the privacy of her abode, where she had promised to show you a photograph in evidence of her story. It was not until you were inside this abode, however, that you discovered the girl's treachery. When it was too late you realised what was required of you—the girl's crazy idea of your stealing an aeroplane and flying her to this so-called parent. You can leave all the rest out—that dope about your having fallen for the little lady's charms and being trapped in this place. You understand?"

"Well, rather! I say, Armstrong, you are a brick. I mean to say. . . ."

"Never mind that. Have you got your story pat?"

"I'm word perfect, sir."

The Skipper smiled.

"Right, boys. Come on, now. Let's go!"

CHAPTER XVII

LIKE A THIEF IN THE NIGHT

IT is true that I am a fairly light sleeper, but when I had been awakened two nights in succession I thought it well to take precautions. Each night there had been just the suspicion of a sound. I had sat up. There was nothing further, even though I had remained upright for hours. I didn't like it. I had more than enough knowledge of the cat-like tread of the native of those parts.

The circumstances were suspicious chiefly because I was then occupying the Skipper's quarters at Ramadi, he being still away, engaged on the Mahrilya case. As second-in-command, I was in charge of the Fourteenth Patrol. Naturally I did not care to have anything happen to my discredit during that period. Moreover, it seemed to me that someone was anxious to get into Armstrong's quarters. It could not be just an ordinary attempt at robbery. No native in his senses would try to break into the patrol barracks at dead of night. His reception might be too hot. The place was guarded day and night.

Yet someone had twice attempted to get into the Skipper's room while I was occupying it. I was convinced of that. Who? And why? Bain and I set a trap. Nothing happened for several nights. Then it came.

It must have been somewhere around three in the morning. Bain was lying in the bed, wide awake, but breathing evenly and steadily, like a man in sound sleep. I stood with my back to the wall, shifting from one foot to the other, growing rather tired of this silly game and about ready to give it up. A few feet away was an unglazed window covered with a straw chick. The moon penetrated this, throwing a network of light and shadow across the floor.

Then came the soft scrape on the ledge. I stiffened, flattened myself in the recess of the wall, and watched. A knife was slipped through the chick with hardly a sound. It dropped downwards, slitting the chick from top to bottom. A head appeared with knife in mouth. It was a brown head with a sparse beard and a bald pate. It shone queerly as the moonlight caught it. I saw the reason for that when the man slid into the room. He was naked—and oiled from head to foot. The apache of the East. The sort of slimy customer who is employed by others on very special occasions. Not a sneak-thief but something much more desperate, and far more slippery than an eel.

I watched him move like some lithe, sinuous animal, across the network of shadow. He did not go near the bed but made for a cabinet in the corner. That cabinet was Armstrong's property. It contained, besides a few valuable curios and other personal effects, a considerable sum in cash—the patrol's pay. But it could not have been the cash that had attracted the oiled visitor. Having neither clothes nor bag in which to stow it, he could not have carried it away. I tried to think, in those fleeting seconds, just what it could be.

He would find that cabinet a tough proposition, thought I, with only a knife to open it. Then I saw he had placed the knife on the soft matting that served for carpet. His hand went to his mouth again as he crouched over the lock. Evidently he carried his tools in his mouth. He was an amazingly silent worker. A mouse would have made no more noise than he, as he gently withdrew a tray from the interior of the cabinet.

For some minutes he searched diligently but soundlessly. Then he straightened up, crossed the room like a cat and made for the torn chick. In that instant I sprang. There was a three-foot space between the bed and the wall. Bain's arm reached over and caught the native's leg. But the oiled member slipped that grip easily enough. He was quick, that oiled killer. My arms slithered down his naked body as I tried to drag him from the window-ledge. It is almost impossible to keep a grip on skin that has been well oiled.

Then Bain threw in his weight. We clawed at the slippery devil, our clothes carrying away the grease as we struggled with him. Never a sound came from the native, nor from us, as we clutched and clawed in that shadowy room. The contact of our clothes against the man's body affected the situation at last. We had rubbed so much of the stinking slime from him that it became possible to hold him in a firm grip. Putting all my weight behind the blow, I struck him flush on the point. He collapsed like a punctured bladder and lay still.

"He's fixed," grunted Bain.

We put on the lights and stared round the room. A knife with a long curved blade lay near the window.

A few inches from it was what at first glance appeared to be a dirty piece of paper. But it wasn't. It was a photograph, crumpled and stained with oil. Bain dived for it. We stared in amazement.

"Waal! Whaddya know about that?"

It was the photograph that the Skipper had taken from Mahrilya, the portrait of an English peer who had signed his name across it.

"But I should have thought the Skipper would have taken this darned picture with him."

"Oh no, Bain. He had it copied. It is too valuable a piece of evidence to carry around. He left it locked away here for safety's sake against the time when it would be wanted at the inquiry."

"Yeah! So what?"

"It begins to look as if somebody wanted it rather badly!"

"You said it, Digger. An' this slippery swine has been hired to lift it, huh? Waal! Ain't that too bad!"

"I guess we'd better tie him up."

"Sure! He's going to spill the beans good and plenty when his daylight's open again," chuckled Bain.

"Satisfied now?" I grinned.

"Yeah. Your hunch was okay. It'll be fun making this guy open up. I guess we'll get a line on this Mahrilya mystery now."

We did not, however, attempt to make the native open up, preferring to wait for the Skipper's return. Though at this stage both Bain and I knew sufficient about the Arabian mentality to be able to prise the necessary information out of our prisoner, we agreed that it would be more interesting to watch the specialist on the job.

It did not take Armstrong long to size up the situation. He gathered the patrol together in the compound and had the native brought out. In spite of his beard and bald pate, he was not by any means old. The crown was shaven and the beard soft. He was, in fact, a tough wallah in his prime. We soon realised it would take a great deal to make the fellow talk.

The Skipper tried questioning. Who employed him? Who wanted the Sahib's picture? Why was it wanted? All these and many more fell on deaf ears. Bald pate sat stolidly and never a word passed his lips.

"I suppose he ain't deaf, by any chance?" queried Bain.

Armstrong's lips curled.

"There is the light of understanding in his eyes. He doesn't seem to be able to hide that."

The Skipper then explained patiently and at length what was to happen if he did not speak. The native winced. His eyes widened. It was clear that he understood. But still he uttered no sound.

"All right. Yank him up!" snapped the Skipper. "We'll see what a little native persuasion will do. Hold out his arms. . . ."

Two brawny Cossacks were man-handling the prisoner.

"Tack his hands down. . . . One at a time. There's no hurry. . . . Now pull on the wire. . . . Gently. Hold! Don't drag the wire until I give the order. . . ."

The native's brown face had turned an ashen-grey. Sweat poured down his beard. His eyes were dilated with terror. The pain on his twisted features even made me sweat. Still no sound came from his lips.

"Drag!"

Still no sound from that twisted jowl.

"*Drag!*" snapped Armstrong.

The Skipper's face was cold, unemotional, like a chunk of granite. How he must have hated this job. It takes a native to understand a native. There were times when Armstrong could be very much a native. Now he was being as diabolical as the most blood-thirsty of them. I looked at Bain. That wallah just shrugged his powerful shoulders, raised his eyebrows, as who should say—"A bit more of this, and the prisoner won't be able to talk at all!"

"*Drag!*" Skipper Armstrong spat out the order as if it were poison on his tongue.

Two powerful Cossacks heaved at the wire. I guess it would have taken *them* a long time to grow tired of this entertainment. Russians and Arabians have much in common. I do not know which is the more stoical, impervious and impassive, when occasion demands.

Suddenly a spout of blood dyed the fellow's beard. He screamed.

"All right. Let go!"

The Cossacks unharnessed the wretched prisoner and flung him down. He lay gasping for breath, sweat and blood matting his beard. His two great paws were pressing on the bald pate. In that attitude he looked as much an ape as anything I've seen.

The Skipper yanked him to his feet, rapped out a few queries in the native's own vernacular. Bald pate indicated that he was ready to talk. He was soused with water and given a drink. Then he sat on his haunches mopping himself and talking freely enough.

It was an amazing story. There was a white man, of sorts, backing Mahrilya in her attempt to foist herself

upon the English peer. The idea, of course, was for the girl to get in touch with the nobleman whom she was claiming as father and, presenting her evidence, set about extorting a large sum of hard cash from him. There were half a dozen natives in the scheme, as well as Mahrilya and the so-called white man. This little bunch would be in clover for the rest of their lives—supposing the scheme could be made to work.

But they had reckoned without Zara our star espionage agent. She was more than that. Skipper Armstrong had once saved her sister from a living death. She had never forgotten. She never would forget. She worshipped Armstrong. She knew that she could never be anything more to him than a good friend. She knew the man. She was content to be his slave. She dedicated her life to his service. There was never a minute of the day that she relaxed in her mission. When she saw young Pearson playing the fool with Mahrilya she could have had no idea as to what lay behind it. She saw only a British officer in danger, and to her all such men were brothers of Armstrong Sahib. When young Pearson disappeared she suspected Mahrilya at once and straightway reported to her friend.

We lost no time in following up the native's story. Baronov was left in charge of the patrol while the Skipper, Bain and I, with six of the boys to escort the prisoner, went off in search of one Fergus, a white man who had "gone native." Fougass, the natives called him. It was an improvement on his family name and more in keeping with the life he had lived since the close of the Great War. We learned that this ambitious scheme of extorting thousands from an English peer

originated with this ingenious if cunning Fergus. An impressionable young airman and a faithful Armenian girl spy had brought it all to the surface, as it were.

Two days' trek brought us to the capital city once more. Our prisoner, now become guide, led us through the labyrinthine alleys and byways of the stink quarter, where the lowest scum of the native element dwelt. We thought we knew a lot about that strange Eastern city, but this guide taught us a lot more. One thing we discovered was that there were a few white men in the quarter, the riffraff and dregs left behind by the war, who had taken to their bosoms native wives, who had adapted themselves to the native life, customs *and conditions*—which were pretty ghastly, to say the least. Had we gone without the guide to search for such a white man, we should have been faced with about a score or so of similar cattle and, in the circumstances, it would not have been difficult for Fergus or Fougass, to make himself scarce. We could do nothing with such men, of course, save let them rot on the beds they had made. We were concerned only with Mahrilya's scheming friend.

We found him in the midst of his family—a native woman, whom, doubtless, he had long since come to loathe and hate—and his several children, brats of the most despised grey-brown variety. It was easier to understand now, seeing him in the bosom of his family, just how his cunning brain had come to devise such a plan of escape. For escape it certainly was in his eyes. Apparently he had spent most of his slothful days in thinking up such schemes. His one thought for the future was to make a get-away, and with sufficient

dough to put him on easy street. To that end he had concocted his crazy schemes.

He had the shock of his life when we dragged him from the hovel he called home. At first he was inclined to bluster. He didn't see why a bunch of well-dressed Arabs should come along and start rough-housing for nothing at all. The Arab gentlemen could have nothing against him. Had he not become one of them, taken an Arab woman for wife, turned Moslem, given half a dozen children to the race. He really talked as if he had conferred a great honour upon Arabia by going native. The fellow had the most astounding sort of mentality!

It should be appreciated that even then we did not know just how far Mahrilya's story could be substantiated. The girl did possess some evidence. If her mother had been half as beautiful as the little dancing girl. . . . Stranger things have happened in time of war.

When we disillusioned Fergus he began to show his true colours. His dirty brown face went a shade green and a shade yellow. We spoke to him in his own tongue. He had a justifiable fear of the word, "police." However, he knew that the authorities could have nothing on him—until we brought bald pate forward. Then he realised what he was up against. The miserable little wretch looked almost pitiable. He was in a blue funk. Quite literally, he trembled. He was about the most despicable specimen of a white man I've known, and I've seen a few. One thing he had been unable to emulate in his native environment and that was pluck. He had no guts. He cringed. He did not speak so much as whine.

"You're not going to take the word of a native against that of a white man, are you? Gawd! That bloke has been telling you a pack of lies. A pack of lies, I say!"

His voice rose to a scream.

"On your way!" snorted Armstrong, in disgust. "You will have ample opportunity to talk at the inquiry."

"Inquiry! My Gawd! I ain't goin' to no inquiry."

He made a feeble attempt to break away. He hadn't a chance. Our boys were accustomed to dealing with rascals much tougher than he was.

We made a sorry procession as we marched along through the streets. No man cares to make an exhibition of one of his own race before the native element. It is never a pretty sight.

"Say, Skipper! The best thing we can do with this little runt is to dump him in the river. . . ."

"With a lump of lead on his heels? Wish we could."

"Well," said I, "so long as he doesn't start weeping before we reach the calaboose. . . ."

By the time we had come up with the guardhouse, however, Fergus was considerably calmer. Maybe he was conning over his "story," had realised the necessity for putting up some sort of case.

He walked into the guardroom quite jauntily—until he saw Mahrilya. Then the fun began all over again. The girl spat contemptuously. Loathing was writ across her pretty features. Fergus began to scream:

"This is a put up job! These natives are trying to frame this on me! An' you're letting 'em get away with it! Is this British justice! I tell you it's all a pack

of lies. I know nothing about this mad scheme to pinch a 'plane and blackmail Lord——”

“Silence!”

Colonel Ross-Coverdale, our Commissioner, was in charge. It did not take that grizzled warrior long to extract Fergus's whole history from him—beginning with his period of service during the War, and continuing through a series of more or less despicable delinquencies since he had gone native. The Commissioner pursued his interrogations with relentless vehemence. And at last Fergus was, metaphorically speaking, grovelling on the floor. The whole story came tumbling out of the miserable wretch.

The scheme, it appeared, has been in preparation for many months, but the perpetrators could hardly go ahead while Mahrilya's mother was alive. It was after she died that they began to push their scheme forward.

There must have been some spark of pity in the Commissioner for his miserable compatriot, for it was noticeable that he made no attempt then, or later, to inquire into the cause of the death of the dancing girl's mother. Maybe he considered the case contemptible enough without going deeper into side issues which might lead to more tragic results.

The upshot of it all was that Fergus and his erstwhile friends were banished to the Andaman Islands. Though not in any way a Devil's Island, that convict settlement is the sort of tight little island from which no man returns. The climate there, even in the hot season, is more equable than in most tropical stations. The men and women of the settlement mix freely in a kind of communal village life, and are, in fact, permitted to marry. So that such members as Fergus could go

native to their heart's content. In fact, the settlers can do pretty much as they please on Andaman Islands—except get off it.

The schemer, Fergus, should certainly have ample leisure to meditate on his misdeeds, especially that one concerning a photograph given to him in all good faith. Had he not begged that autographed portrait from the officer whom, during a part of the Great War, he served as batman in the Irak field, or had that officer declined to give such a memento to his servant, the “native” Fergus of the post-war period could not have concocted such a crazy scheme of treacherous blackmail.

CHAPTER XVIII

THERE'S DEATH IN THE PHANTOM DRUMS

SOFT shifting sand. Soft—and as treacherous as hell. In that part of the desert the drifts rose and fell in irregular waves, surging, as it were, like the vast ocean itself. The pitiless rays of a noonday sun beat down upon us, in waves, rolled over the desert world like the blast of some giant furnace. Sun and sand, sun and sand. Nothing but sun and sand for hours on end, until the tortured spirit must scream at the deadly monotony of it.

The progress of the Fourteenth Irak Desert Patrol, camel-mounted, riding single file, was one of perpetual ascent and descent in the soft yet treacherous golden dust. The camels loped and swayed indifferently up and down the slopes and deeps of the burning dust.

We halted in a sun-baked hollow for our customary cigarette space. Water skins were tipped and men drank greedily. The camels couched without command, were content to stare like stolid cows at the monotony of sand and sand and more parching sand.

And suddenly the death-like stillness was broken by a vague rumbling, an eerie humming, drumming sound, that broke upon the hot air in waves, rolled, sometimes loud, sometimes soft, like the heat and the sand—wave upon wave.

I glanced across at the Wahabis. Every single man of them had flopped down into the dust at the first

whisper of that drumming sound. Their backs were arched in supplication to Allah. No man amongst us of the non-Moslem element said a word. We simply sat and stared. Many of us had experienced this strange phenomenon of the desert before. But we did not discuss it. To the Wahabis, as to all Arabians, it means only one thing—death.

This was Arabia, not Africa. Drums are not beaten in Arabia. The tribes of brown men have other means of communication. They do not beat the drum, except at feasts and religious ceremonies. These were the phantom drums, the Arabs said, and there's death in the phantom drums.

There may be some scientific explanation for the drum-like sounds that sometimes roll over the desert stillness. I do not know the cause. I know only that on the few occasions when I have heard that weird drumming—death has followed, and quickly.

I looked around at the faces of the men I could understand, the Europeans, the men from the North and those from the West. All were serious, unmoved, betraying nothing. We know better than to sneer at such native superstitions.

For death came, and that quickly. We had not been going for more than an hour when the scouts signalled. Thereafter a cloud of dust until we came upon the dead bodies of seven men. At first we thought them natives. But they were not. We recognised the regulation *abba*—the plum-blue *abba* of the Eleventh Patrol. They were European members of that patrol. The skin of a man's face may tan to a mahogany hue and a bearded jowl may help the deception; but a white man's body remains white.

They had been relieved of their arms, ammunition pouches and knives. But their bodies were untouched. There had been no attempt at mutilation. This could hardly be the work of Arabs.

"Not a wound among them," grunted Bain, turning the bodies over. "So what?"

"Poison," said the Skipper, succinctly.

There was evidence enough of poison in the blackened and swollen tongues.

Suddenly the Skipper dropped down beside one of the bodies, turned the face upwards and stared. Had the dead man been his brother he could not have shown more concern—he who so rarely showed any sort of feeling in his granite features. Slowly he rose to his feet, still gazing down on the dead policeman.

"Saunders," he murmured. "Captain of the Eleventh."

"Good heavens!" I gasped.

"Gosh! Looks as if there'd been a mutiny in that mob, huh?"

"Something of the sort."

"A renegade freebootin', I guess."

"What duty was the Eleventh posted for?" I asked.

There was that in Armstrong's eyes which boded ill for someone.

"They'd been despatched as a special guard for the scientists excavating at Kai," he said.

"I know it."

Bain laughed. "Don't most of us ex-legionnaire wallahs know it? An ancient city half buried in the dust of the ages. There's an Anglo-American museum crowd there, industrious as a swarm o' bees, and they're lookin' for pretty stones and such, huh?"



“THERE IS BUT ONE GOD, ALLAH, AND MOHAMMED IS HIS PROPHET.”

[Photo: Fox Photos, Ltd.]

That was true. There wasn't an ex-Foreign Legion man among us who did not know Kai. We had reason enough. Kai lay across the borderline of Irak and Syria on the fringe of the Jebel Druse country. As legionnaires, we had fought historic fights with the Druse in and about the ruins of Kai.

"Bain!" snapped the Skipper. "Get some men on this job. See that they dig deeply. These shifting sands. . . ."

But it was sundown before we were on our way. We must find the remainder of the Eleventh Patrol. During my years with the Irak Desert Patrol, this was the one and only occasion of mutiny in the ranks that I ever came upon. It looked as if some member of the Eleventh had gone berserk, taken it into his head to try a spot of freebooting. How many of the patrol had he persuaded to join him? Should we find others lying around the desert? And what was it for? What could he hope to do with his band of renegades? Was it his idea to start a career of robbery and pillage on his own? These were some of the queries that worried us as we trekked through that miserable night. This was something new to us. To find seven of our brothers in arms like that—poisoned, pegged into the dirt, killed because they would not join a freebooter in some mad scheme. That's how we figured it.

"Waal, he ain't the first to go over to the natives. Perhaps he reckons on being the sheik of a thousand Arabs, huh?"

"If that is what has happened," said Armstrong, "he's the first man of the patrol to turn renegade."

"Don't see any other way of accounting for those guys we've put under the dirt."

"I hope our surmises are all wrong," said I.

"Arabs don't kill that-a-way," insisted Bain.

"All I want is to get my hands on the swine!" snorted the Skipper. "If you can't trust a policeman . . . And out here. . . ."

"*Le cafard*. That's the only way to explain a case of this sort. Some fellow has run amok in the Eleventh. Mebbe he has seen so much work of the women. . . . Turned his brain, I guess. He wants to try a spot of pillage and massacre himself. Hasn't it happened in the Legion many a time?"

"It has never happened in a patrol! We don't know that it has happened now."

"There didn't seem any evidence of a camp back there," I said. "Perhaps we're all wrong. . . ."

"Nope. We ain't. Some wallah has gone *cafard* and taken part of the patrol with him. And, anyhow, where'd you find traces of a camp of anything else in this blasted sand? I guess we. . . ."

"Shut up, Bain!"

"Okay, skipper."

Armstrong swung round in his saddle and roared the order:

"*Marchez au trot!*"

It had been decided to make for Kai. Whether the Eleventh Patrol, or a remnant of it, had gone there in accordance with orders was more than we could say. But clearly we had to see how matters stood at that particular spot before developing any other plan. If the Eleventh was not there we should have to start in to search for it. That might take days or weeks, living on the country, but it was clearly our job to find the missing patrol.

We did not stay the camels throughout the whole of that night. Hour after hour we loped along. The moon was high and at full, shedding an eerie glow over the plains. I have spent many nights in the desert, but never have I seen one more beautiful. In other circumstances it would have been a great joy. The vast sheet of sand had turned to silver. There was no sound in that strange world, save the soft crunch of velvet-footed hoofs as they leapt in and out of the dust. We were in a world of our own, a world without habitation, without the possibilities of habitation in that huge expanse of silver barrenness, on the veritable edge of things, where the rim of the plains reached up to the sky in a soft violet gloom.

This was the desert that inspired—or destroyed, the desert that, like the ocean it so much resembled, men can never tame. An old, a cruel, a fascinating, an alluring world, a world that will twist and warp a man's brain so that he becomes a crazy being, a thing as mad as the Bedouins who dwell in it. A devilish place in which to think and think. . . . One rode through it as if hypnotised. There was that eerie vibration in the silvery atmosphere which kept the human senses strung. . . .

Then, out of that unearthly radiance ahead, rose the broken line of the mountains. The sight of that dim, ghostly range brought queer memories to the legionnaires among us, memories of blood-thirsty scraps with the ferocious Druse, of the signing of a peace pact, nights of carousal with the Druse women and girls—who could be so bestial and sadistic in battle alongside their men and yet so bewitching and alluring in the days of peace. The strangest, most

inexplicable in the world, those Druse women, vixens and vipers one hour, sirens and sylphs the next.

"How long before we hit the pass, Skipper?"

"Less than an hour, I should say."

"Just about daybreak, huh?"

"Remember the battle of Sueida, Bain?"

"Do I? Gosh! What a fight! The old city was reeking with blood. And to think it's within reach—away over those hills. Wonder what the froggies would say if we turned up there one day?"

"They'd never recognise us," laughed Armstrong.

"Nope. Not in this clobber—and the chin mats. Made my getaway from Sueida when I slipped the Legion."

"Yes? There was a big number 'going on pump' after the peace celebrations."

"Talking of celebrations—there was one li'l dame I'll never forget. The minx wanted me to go with her, make a home with her people in the hills. Say! And what a peach!"

"Why didn't you go?"

"Huh? Me? Egypt's Queen! Whadda life! Worse than the Foreign Legion. Why, I'd never know when the bitch was going to love-me-love-me-not or just tit-tat-too. That's the trouble with those dames—all clinging sweetness one time and fire and brimstone the next. But the kid certainly knew her marbles. I will say that for her. . . . Nope. When I slipped the Legion it was a case of *marchez ou crevez*—but I guess you know that one, Digger!"

I certainly did. One could never forget that gruelling trek after escaping the Legion, five days or five weeks—how could one know? Armstrong said never a word.



“AN OLD, A CRUEL, A FASCINATING WORLD . . . A THING AS MAD AS THE BEDOUINS WHO DWELL IN IT”
[Photo : Associated Press]

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He was not given to reminiscing. Maybe he was content to think about that hellish trek. And Gyppo? Poor old Gyppo! A good deal had happened since those Legion days.

We loped along in silence for a space, busy with our thoughts. The line of mountains drew nearer, began to take more definite shape. Soon we had left the deep sand for harder ground. We waded through knee-high bush, leapt boulders, and came at last to the mouth of the pass.

By this time the moon had paled. For a little while we were shrouded in grey mist. Then the heavens broke up in the birth of another day. Within the confines of that secret highway, patched with sand and rubble, we could glimpse the low crumbling walls of Kai, the veritable image of desolation, the dry bones of a once magnificent city half-buried by the sand-laden winds. Between the ragged rents of those city walls the broken columns stood crazily against the brightening sky. It looked like the city of the dead, a city returned to the dust whence it came. There was the outline of ruined dwellings half-hidden in mounds of sand, a courtyard surrounded by broken statutory, where, perchance, a prince had made love to his princesses two thousand years before.

We pulled up sharply, my romantic musings shattered. There were ghostly shapes moving among the ruins. They were not of the excavating party, for the day had hardly begun. They had seen us. They were gathering together, curiously, as if uncertain how to receive us. They were armed, the bulging outlines betrayed that.

"Walk march!" ordered the Skipper.

We went forward. We advanced to within six or

seven hundred yards of the broken city wall. As we left the pass for the open clearing that marked the site of the old fort that had once guarded this ancient city, we came into full view of the ruins. We could have no doubt now. The plum-blue *abbas* were unmistakable. Here, then, were the rascals, or some of them, who had once formed the Eleventh Irak Patrol.

There was no sign of the excavating party. It looked as if the police-turned-bandits were now in possession of these ruins—for what they were worth. We knew that there were some women in the party of archæologists, among a group of students selected from the Universities of the United States and from England. . . . This rather complicated the situation.

Now it was obvious that the scallywags over there meant business for they were creeping about the old city wall, taking up their line of defence, or attack, according to the way one looked at it.

"The crazy loons!" exclaimed Bain.

"I should say so! There is no doubt about it now. They *must* be mad."

I glanced inquiringly at Armstrong. He was staring fixedly at the cloaked figures methodically spreading out along the walls. Nothing happened for several long moments. We stayed our mounts and watched.

"Of all the benighted fools!" murmured the Skipper, as if he could scarcely credit the evidence of his own sight.

"Think they have a chance of holding us off," chuckled Bain. "Waal, let 'em get nicely settled down Gosh! It's goin' to be a lovely-morning-and-what-have-you! I've seen some cops, desert and street, in my

time—but these! If these yaps weren't tragic, they'd be comic. So what? Shall we give 'em a dirty look and start something?"

Armstrong's face never moved. It might have been chiselled out of rock, the way he sat and gazed, motionless as rock. There seemed to be no life to him, except in his piercing grey eyes. Then he gave the order for the patrol to open out in extended line. We knew what was coming when he drew his Mauser from the bucket and rested the butt on his thigh. Every man followed suit. Every man's eyes were on the beloved Skipper Sahib, waiting for the signal. There was an intervening space of about seven hundred yards between us and those madmen. Our dromedaries could leap that in little over a minute.

Your leader has to do the thinking for his outfit. With Armstrong there was never a wasted move. He could manœuvre his company like a man manipulating automatons. After Allah, his was the figure our Wahabis worshipped most. The Cossacks and the rest of the non-Moslems would have followed him anywhere. They knew, we all knew, that his courage was unequalled, his word his bond, his judgment unassailable, his endurance greater than that of any in the band, Moslem or Christian.

Heavens! What a difference then between the Fourteenth and the Eleventh! Two bands of desert police facing each other, soon to be fighting each other. What stupid game was fate staging now?

"Pass the word along to prepare to charge. No man must dismount until we reach the wall. The *oont-wallahs* will follow up and take over the beasts while we round up that mob."

Even as he talked the shots began to come over, kicking up the dust around the feet of our stolid camels. The Skipper raised his Mauser and gave the command: "Charge!"

The long-extended line of camels came swiftly into action. They leapt across those few hundred yards like greased lightning, their riders hanging on with their heels and firing as they went. Those erstwhile police of the Eleventh must have experienced some astonishment at the sight of that well-disciplined action. The line swept across the clearing like one man, not one camel snout an inch behind or before his neighbour.

In another moment we had dismounted and were scrambling over the broken masonry, fighting at close quarters with the police-cum-bandits, seeking some sort of satisfaction in the bludgeoning of these renegades from a force of which we had grown so proud.

We had no difficulty in locating their leader. He was yelling himself hoarse, urging his men to slaughter these interfering police wallahs. He was screaming his orders in Arabic and mouthing Spanish oaths at the same time. That fixed him. We knew then who had started all this insane pother. Undoubtedly the fellow was mad. He was waving a sabre in a crazy circle about himself, foaming with murderous frenzy. The sand beetle had got him, had entered his brain and made him think he was King of Arabia. And he fought like one demented. God! How he fought!

He was still fighting long after most of his band had been laid out either with bullet wounds or cracked skulls. In the end a dozen of us were dancing around him, dodging his whirling, slashing sabre. We could have filled him with lead easily enough. But we wanted

him alive. A man responsible for so many cold-blooded killings as we had seen could not be allowed to escape by the merciful bullet. We got him at last. One of the Cossacks, swinging his Mauser-butt, caught the fellow's forearm and broke it. The sabre clattered into the dirt. A bunch of men fell upon him.

Only two of our men were seriously wounded. The charge had been too sudden, too swift, to take much of a toll. As for the Eleventh, they were in a sorry state, many of them lay unconscious with bruised heads, three were dead, and one had gone stark raving mad. His piercing shrieks rent the morning air, shriek after shriek, as of one who suffered the tortures of the damned. He was the only one among the band that the Wahabis claimed. They asked for, and were accorded, permission to put the poor devil out of his misery.

For the rest, the Eleventh seemed to have been composed of Baghdadis, Levantines, a couple of Greeks, Syrians and Spaniards, the other Europeans being those fateful seven whom we had buried a few hours ago. We had them all rounded up at last. Their Spanish leader, one Vouletz, gave up his stupid ravings when he saw that the game was all over, that he was in fact a prisoner and the band he had schemed to develop into a great army of the desert was also tied and helpless.

We started to search the ruins. Having secured the prisoners, our next thought was for the party of excavators. I, for one, felt pretty sick at the thought of those industrious archæologists pursuing their studies in this old ruin of a city—only to be set upon by murdering outlaws whom they would accept for police guard!

The half-buried city was a weird place even by day. We found a wide thoroughfare that had been cleared of debris. The party had been at work here. The road was lined with the broken façades of what had once been magnificent buildings. Further on we came upon the ruins of a forecourt, and then the porch of a temple. We passed through and stopped dead. There was a great pool there partly surrounded by broken columns and to these had been lashed the members of the excavating party. They appeared to be alive but in various states of exhaustion. We learned they had been tied up to the masonry for two days, to stare at the shimmering pool and suffer the excruciating agonies of thirst.

Two young men of the party had resisted Vouletz and his gang. They lay dead. Each had been shot through the stomach. One of the four women had died on her feet. The others, bound to the pillars, had perforce to watch her die, while at their feet lay glistening in the sun the crystal pure water that would have saved her. There had been fifteen in the party. Now there were twelve. Just what would have happened to them had we not turned up. . . .

The details of their treatment at the hands of Vouletz were nauseating enough without contemplating as to what might have happened. They were given to us by the leader of the party, a grey-haired professor, a little old man with an astonishing vitality. He was the first to recover under our ministrations. He knew the East. Most of his life—he was nearing seventy—had been spent in conducting parties of students to forgotten cities.

“But,” he said, “never have I had such an experience

as this! When those native police came along we were taken utterly by surprise. We thought they had come to protect us while we worked. But they seized us. And what could we do? We saw those two boys who attempted to resist them shot before our eyes. Poor boys. I advised them not to resist. One can but admire their pluck. But the worst feature of all was to see that poor girl dying. . . . The water at our feet. . . . And we could do nothing. I shall never get the picture out of my mind—never! Those they had left to guard us simply stood about and watched her die. It was the most diabolical thing. . . . I begged them to give her water, but they only laughed, jeered at us. I was thankful when I saw that the other girls had lost consciousness. They could not see, could not hear what was happening to their friend. It is terrible, terrible! And I am responsible! It was I who persuaded them to come out here. Never again shall I organise an expedition . . . never again!”

Tears ran down the old man's face. He was utterly broken.

“I wish that I, too, could have died. Cowardly, isn't it? But how am I to face life with the memory of this horrible experience? How can I face the future knowing that I am responsible for that poor girl's agonising death . . . and those brave boys!”

“No, no!” urged Armstrong. “No man in his senses could hold you responsible. That man, Vouletz, is responsible. We shall attend to him later. Try to pull yourself together, there's a good fellow. You're been wonderful, old man, just wonderful.”

The professor smiled, shook his head sadly.

"You know, it is just heavenly to hear your voice, to hear the English tongue. Why, it's the finest language in the world!"

We sat in a group about that pool, a mixed sort of crowd, a score of the patrol and that handful of boys and girls—for they were little more—youngsters who had come out to this ancient land full of enthusiasm for the work they had embarked upon, dreaming perhaps of the discoveries they would make beneath the dust of this old city.

Bain was seated on the ground near the three girls, whom he had helped to revive. Two of them were from the States. They were naturally overjoyed to meet him, this world-wandering compatriot, this policeman of the desert who dressed like an Arab! His tongue did more for them than all the stimulants he had to offer!

"But what I can't understand," he was saying, "is what could attract those bandits to this spot. Since they'd decided to desert the police patrol and turn bandit, why didn't they go off to the desert towns and villages. There ain't anything here that robbers could want. . . ."

The professor turned suddenly towards Bain.

"That is where you are quite wrong, my boy. There is that here which all robbers covet. Come, gentlemen, I will show you."

The old man led us round the pool to a corner of the temple where excavations had been going on. He pointed. There, at a depth of about twelve feet, lay a shining object, an image fashioned in gold. It was an idol some four feet in length and about a foot in thickness. Gold. The very sight of it overawed us. We

just stood on the edge of that hole and stared at it. Gold. The stuff that men covet.

"Gosh! It must be worth a million dollars!" whispered Bain.

"A million dollars?" murmured the professor, "but it cannot be worth the lives of that dear girl and those two boys."

CHAPTER XIX

BETRAYED BY HERO WORSHIP

THE day was building slowly. Dawn was giving way to sunrise. A great light was coming up over the Eastern horizon, mounting higher and higher, unfolding in a glorious wealth of crimson and gold. It fell upon and coloured a vast concourse of people, men, women, and children too, crowded together in the great square before the jail of Ramadi. The dense throng shifted and swayed, this way and that, a sea of faces lifted, beggars of the gutter jostling merchants of the bazaar in their anxiety to catch a glimpse of the scaffold, the grim timbered structures that stood out starkly against the brilliant heavens, the ropes waving gently in the soft morning breeze. In a frenzy of anticipation a great wall of brown men and women pressed close to the rails which encircled the prison. Over the multitude was a heavy droning sound, the hum of excited voices.

I marvelled. These natives of Northern Arabia were quite beyond me. It was barely five of the morning and the executions were not until six. True, the executions were to be something different in their eyes. But even so, this mob could hardly have slept. There were no castes here, no distinctions, no class, no snobbery of race, creed or breed. Here was just an excited mob, waiting to see men die. There were labourers from the outlying farmsteads cheek by jowl with veiled women of the city, religious mendicants

jostled and pushed with the shameless and the unveiled. Men in scanty loin cloths, displaying dark brown limbs of incredible muscle, brushed the flowing robes of wealthy sheiks.

But none noticed these things. They had eyes only for the scaffold. Here was an amazing study in mob psychology. Faces shone with animation. The brown, the black, the yellow, the unbelievably pale of Persian, Assyrian, Circassian and Armenian, were all strangely alike under the glow of that blood-red, golden-yellow dawn, all quickened by the same inexplicable passion for the sensation of a public killing.

"What a mob!" exclaimed Bain. "If we'd arranged the executions for two o'clock of the morning, they'd have been here just the same."

"Prompted by pretty much the same feelings as our own folks who fill the courthouses at famous trials," said I.

"Yeah. Sure. Only more so! We're civilised. We take our barbaric entertainments a li'l' more politely. Get me? Why, I guess we don't push quite as hard."

It was with a set purpose that we mingled with the hustling, pushing mob. We were looking for someone. In that multitude it was like searching for the proverbial needle in the proverbial haystack. Every member of our patrol was in that crowd—somewhere. The men of the two other patrols were also scattered about. We were all searching for the same rascal. Our leaders, Armstrong and two other Patrol Captains, had taken up a position of vantage on the fringe of the rabble, where every patrolman could see them, whatever his position in the great gathering.

As far as the Irak Desert Patrols were concerned, the occasion was historic. We had spent the better part of eight months in rounding up the most troublesome gang of cattle thieves, cut-throats and outlaws that even those regions had known. And then, after all our weary trekking, searching, and fighting, after bringing in the most callous bunch of murderers we'd ever had to deal with, five of them had escaped from jail.

We had got on their trail, followed them into the hills, had been ambushed by five desperate men, had lost eleven of our men in re-capturing four of those five. Back there, on the fringe of the crowd, the Skipper was hiding a slung arm under his *burnous*. Tsamorsui, our Japanese member who had spent three months in dock as a result of the lead he had stopped during the Tel Kala scrap, and who had been back with us only a few weeks, was one of the unlucky eleven. After those eleven funerals we did not feel so good.

This morning was to see four public executions. But we found no consolation in that. The man who had led these desperadoes, the man behind all the killings and horrible massacres of the past few months, was still at large. His four companions had ambushed a whole patrol, had fought us almost to a standstill. And we did not know then, could not know, that they were doing it only to give their chief enough time to make his getaway.

So that, after all these months of trekking, of scouring the countryside, after all our losses, the chief bandit had got away.

He was free to begin again. He undoubtedly would. Murder was an industry with him. The fellow was a perambulating arsenal—armed to the teeth. He was



“THIS MORNING WAS TO SEE FOUR PUBLIC EXECUTIONS ”

[Photo : Central Press Photograph]

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the type of picturesque outlaw who could always attract to himself the more callous and bloodthirsty of the hillmen.

The peasantry went in mortal fear of him. They could give us no assistance. Those who knew anything of his movements dared not speak. They were too terrified to give him away, even though there was a price on his head, a reward of five thousand rupees for information which would lead to his capture.

And there were, of course, the crazy women who openly professed their love for this Abu Shah, this greatest of bandits, the robber with a hundred killings to his credit, the insane robber who would sometimes leave a trail behind him—of his victims tied in bundles.

There was just a chance that we might get him on this bright and sunny morning. It would be like him to be in at the death of his four compatriots, the four staunch comrades who had murdered in order to save him. This would be the kind of exhibition to attract such a glutton for killings.

Bain and I were wandering among the assembly in the guise of holy men. We had seen many of our comrades, also moving about among the people. There was a blind beggar, stumbling up against his neighbours. Maybe he was depending on his sense of touch to tell him when he had hit up against Abu Shah . . . the feel of armoury beneath a thick *burnous*. There were water sellers, pedlars, fruit merchants with baskets of melons for the thirsty, vendors of coloured ices, merchants with skewers of meat black with flies, men of our patrol, secret desert police anxious to earn that reward. We could recognise most of them.

But we could not recognise Abu Shah.

"I guess he's here, somewhere in this crazy mob. That guy wouldn't miss a show like this for all the silks in Baghdad. Gosh! If only we could lay our paws on him, huh? Five thousand rupees! And what have you!"

"Nights in Baghdad long to be remembered!"

"You said it, Digger."

"There's a danger in finding him, too."

"Yeah. I get you. If this mob got at him, they'd batter his daylight out."

"I guess so. Sort of throwing him to the wolves."

"Wolves would be tame cats in comparison."

"I think the Skipper's plan is a good one."

"Sure! The wallah who finds him signals to the Skipper. When we see the Skipper leave his post and join the happy throng—why, we sort of gather round, make a crowd of our own, close him in, cover up the Skipper's persuasion to get him on his way. . . . If this crowd gets an inkling . . . I hope it works."

"First find your man."

"Yeah. Helloa! They're bringing 'em out."

From our position in the crowd we could see the four bandits being marched to the scaffold. One of the doomed wretches was still eating. He had a great hunk of bread in one hand and a piece of meat in the other. He passed first one and then the other to his mouth, greedily, swaggeringly, proud of his performance before that swaying multitude. He was going to Allah with a full belly and a grin on his face. He waved, with a fist full of bread, at the sea of faces. His companions were in different case. Their faces were sullen, their black eyes baleful.

But they were not going to Allah—at least, not according to their creed. They were lined up on the

scaffold, their arms pinioned. The prison governor stepped forward, and with his sabre shaved off each murderer's beard, shaved each one clean as a new-born babe, amid the raucous guffaws of the vast assembly.

That in itself was enough, since, according to their creed, Allah would never accept beardless boys as grown men. But, as the laughing crowd knew, there was more to come.

Now the hanging of a Moslem is the most degrading of deaths. Always the friends or relatives, or even strangers, will take the knife to the body after death so that the blood may flow and Allah be appeased.

But in the case of these four bandits it had been decreed that the demonstration before the great crowd should go a step further in this humiliation of men before Allah.

The amazing mob became more and more excited, more and more vociferous at the sight of those swinging bodies. For they knew that no man would be permitted the customary use of the knife. These bodies were to be taken away by the guard, composed entirely of non-Moslems, and conveyed to a secret burial place of which no man knew. The knife was not to be used to save the souls of such assassins for Allah. The crowd literally danced with excitement while they waited for the dead men to be cut down and thrown into the waiting waggon. The *nasranis*¹ could defy even Allah!

"Now is the time to keep a sharp lookout."

"Sure! This is the moment when Abu Shah is likely to give himself away."

Our eyes roved searchingly over the jostling throng. We pushed our way hither and thither, bringing curses

¹ Christians—more loosely, all non-Moslems.

down on our heads from the disturbed sightseers. It was now or never! Perhaps we had brushed by the fellow without knowing. It is true we had a description of him. But in this crowd. . . . We knew that he was a gentleman with one ear missing. Not that that was any help. The defect would be covered. His *haik* or *burnous* could easily be adjusted. He could dye his beard, could dress in any of a hundred different ways. He could veil himself—though that would be dangerous. A Taureg in the Baghdad area was a rarity, so rare as to be suspicious.

But what had he done with his split nose? I inspected more noses that morning than I've ever done before or since! And there is no greater variety of noses than that to be found in an Eastern mob. We had broken ones by the hundred—the flattened, the hooked, the negroid, the bulbous, the sharp, the large and the small but mostly large—and never a split one.

Two holy men in search of a split nose! Maybe we were just unlucky. Maybe Abu Shah was not in this crowd at all.

"Mebbe he's patched it up. Some of these guys are very slick at handling clay and sich."

"It's beginning to look pretty hopeless."

"The Skipper's still up there."

"Yes. I'm afraid we've stuck a bad patch. The fellow is probably away up in the hills, getting another murdering bunch together."

"Nope, Digger. I'm certain he's around somewhere. I can feel it in me bones."

We continued to thread our way through the seething multitude. We could pick our men out, still busy, still searching. The Wahabis among us were certain that

no disguise could get past them. So far, however, the fellow had succeeded—supposing he were here at all.

"La ilaha Allah wa Mahommed-ar-rasul Allah!"

We pushed on and on, word perfect now in our oft-repeated incantation: "There is but one God, Allah, and Mohammed is His Prophet." We must have muttered our recitation a few hundred times that morning!

I became aware of a veiled figure brushing my elbow, keeping step. Some pious woman, I thought, anxious to feel the presence of these "holy men." I paid no further attention to her. Occasionally a mother, not too absorbed in the pageant of death up there on the scaffold, had taken the baby from her breast and held it for us to touch. But this veiled creature, I saw, was being very persistent. I suddenly became suspicious. Had she penetrated our disguise? Was she a spy of the rascal Abu Shah? Maybe he was staging something—even here. The killer had nerve and insolence enough.

Then the woman dug her elbow into my ribs. I gave her a sidelong glance. It was impossible to penetrate that veil. Whether she were old or young, friend or foe, I could not say. Again she dug her elbow.

"Follow!" she whispered.

In that appalling racket the whisper was so faint that I wondered whether I had heard aright, or whether this were just the deceptive imagining of an anxious mind. When, however, she stepped forward and began to proceed a pace in front of us, I decided there must be something here worth following.

I gave Bain a warning look.

"She says, 'follow.'"

"*La ilaha Allah wa Mohammed-ar-rasul Allah!*" was Bain's throaty answer.

And we followed the veiled woman.

She led us to the fringe of the vast crowd, paused, went on again, turned back, then halted behind the hooded figure of a man and a veiled woman, standing closely together. The woman was touching the hooded man, caressing the rich material of his *abba*, as if he were a holy man, though he was nothing of the sort, nor was he dressed as such. I stared at the couple for a full minute. Their backs revealed nothing. One had to proceed with caution. To have confronted them might have been fatal. I had guessed, without seeing the hooded man's face, just who he was!

It looked to me as if the famous brigand had been given away by a worshipping maid. The veiled woman who had guided us thither had seen the other woman hero-worshipping. Trust a woman to detect a thing like that—in another woman, even though the pair of them were veiled!

I stole a glance at Bain. He answered with an almost imperceptible lift of an eyebrow. But we had to make sure. We must be certain of our man. We should look awful fools were we to give the signal to the Skipper and gather a hundred and fifty patrolmen around the wrong guy! One had to make a quick decision in those anxious but thrilling minutes. Soon the crowd would disperse, for already the waggon had been brought forward and the dead bodies were being tumbled in, one by one.

A hurried whisper to Bain and he had moved off—to return almost immediately, passing in front of this strange couple, chanting his incantation—"La ilaha

Allah wa Mohammed-ar-rasul Allah . . . Allah . . . Allah. . . ."

His throaty mutterings grew fainter and fainter as he passed on and out beyond the fringe of the crowd. I half-turned, saw that he had halted within a few yards of the Skipper and the other two captains, saw him raise his hand to forehead three times. It was the agreed signal! Armstrong and his two companions jumped down and hurried towards Bain, then the four of them began to make their way through the crowd towards the couple in front of me. I confess that, at that moment, I was as excited as the devil.

Already the great crowd was beginning to break up, but I noted that many were closing in around me and the couple standing by my side. I began to feel the press of them. The Skipper and his companions broke through and joined me. No words were passed. There was no doubt, however, as to what was happening—a greasy sweetmeat seller had paused before the hooded man. He was joined by water carriers, fruit merchants, other holy men, purveyors of meat that was black with flies—until the men of three patrols, ten or twelve deep, were crowding about us.

The woman hero-worshipper began to grow alarmed. She pulled at the hooded figure as if to draw him along. They moved slowly. In fact, the whole crowd was moving slowly, as if reluctant to leave this fascinating centre of entertainment, and the movement was so adjusted that the hooded man and his companion remained in the centre of the concourse!

Well, it was obvious that this could not go on. Abu Shah was no fool. He suddenly realised what was happening, and instantly he began to lash out, knife

in each hand. The woman joined him. She, too, could use the knife. She was calling out to Abu Shah to break away while she fought these beggars and riffraff. The "beggars" and "pedlars" were prodding the infuriated brigand with their staffs. Even the "blind" took a hand. For all were anxious to keep Abu Shah moving on his way. But the crazy woman was screaming, screaming the name of Abu Shah. She was too excited and too terrified for her lover to realise that she was giving him away. We saw the danger, however. If the dispersing people who were now skirting the edge of our little mob were to grasp the significance of this little fracas, hear the name of Abu Shah shouted about the market-place, it would mean a sticky end for the killer.

It was the other veiled woman who rose to the occasion. She rushed forward swiftly and engaged the screaming woman in combat! In another moment the two women were lunging, slashing and leaping at each other. They were fighting like wild cats, yelling and screaming, scrabbling at each other's clothes, clutching and clawing like demented beasts. They were fast drawing a crowd around them, a crowd of jeering, guffawing men and women who, in spite of the unusual entertainment of the morning, were not yet satiated of sensation, were in fact, only too ready to take their fill of another exciting episode.

That was our opportunity. Which was probably what that mysterious, veiled woman had intended it should be. Under cover of the excitement occasioned by these wild women we were able to secure Abu Shah and convey him to a place from which he was never likely to break away again. His end was a

far more humiliating affair than that of his four companions, the details of which, I fear, would not look too good in print.

And it was a woman who had given him away. A woman's hero-worshipping had tickled his vanity. So that he had been content to have her there, in the very midst of that great noisy throng, caressing him, sleeking his colossal conceit. Another woman had detected the betraying caresses. We had seen the face of that other woman as the two fought, for her veil had been torn away. Even as we dragged Abu Shah from the scene of two women in mad combat we knew that the veiled woman who had guided us to the wanted killer was Zara—our Zara.

CHAPTER XX

TROUBLE IN DAMASCUS

IT was characteristic of friend Bain to choose that sort of holiday. He was an insatiable glutton for thrills and excitement. When the Fourteenth Patrol was turned loose for a spell, as an acknowledgement of the part played in capturing one Abu Shah, it became a question of—"Where do we go for a holiday in this benighted country?" The too-obvious answer to that question was, Baghdad. But we knew our Baghdad pretty well by this time, and though it will always remain for us a place of beauty, dignity and dirt, both in its buildings and its people, we felt the present occasion called for some greater change of scene. So Bain, with a mischievous flicker of his otherwise steely eyes, said:

"Damascus!"

"Damascus!" I exclaimed, "why, you must be crazy! Have you forgotten that Damascus is French territory and that we are fugitive legionnaires—wanted men, with a price on our heads?"

"That's just the point, you big sap! Can't you see? We'd stick on our Arabian clobber and visit the old city as *pukka* merchants from Baghdad. I guess we've enough nounce to get away with that. We've been wearing these *abbas* and *haiks* for years now, why, I guess the clobber is second nature to us. And we can spout the vernacular as good as the next wallah.

We could get away with the lingo, being visitors from Baghdad, huh? Where's the worry?"

At first, the sheer audacity of the idea took my breath away. Then I began to see that, as far as thrills went, there was much more in it than first met the eye!

"Think of the fun!" persisted he of the black silky beard. "Oh, boy! We could mix among legionnaires, French troops *and* their officers, the Spahis, the Chasseurs, the Zouaves, the Tirailleurs, the Algericos and Turcos—hey, ain't you got anything under the roots of your hair! And nobody would recognise us!"

"Meet some old pals, maybe?"

"Nope. Lay off the old-pal idea, Digger. There ain't many legionnaires we could trust."

"I get you. It's a great idea. It will be a marvellous experience to go amongst them—and they not knowing. . . ."

We crossed the desert by bus—motor convoy, they call it. In the west it would be referred to as the bus service. It was new then. In fact, I think we were among the first passengers to make the journey that way from Baghdad to Damascus. It was new enough to us, who'd been sitting camels for years. We luxuriated in the richness of padded and upholstered seats built like armchairs in a motor omnibus that resembled nothing so much as the coach of a streamlined railway train. It whisked us across that historic desert at the speed of a racing dromedary, but without that animal's rolling, pitching motion, so that we had hardly accustomed ourselves to the sleek smoothness of the ultra-modern conveyance when the towers and domes and minarets of Damascus loomed up over the skyline.

The outskirts of the city were full of striking contrasts. It was amusing to see a railway train shrieking off in one direction and a camel caravan padding away in another. There were ancient cabs and modern touring cars, bullock carts designed two thousand years ago, and up-to-the-minute bombing 'planes soaring overhead.

We passed blue hills, careered crazily over grey wastes where nothing grew, came to an occasional Arab farmstead on which life was as primitive as in the days of Moses. In the isolated spots the natives had almost dispensed with clothes, save for some coarse material secured indifferently about their middles. They tilled the land, drove bullock ploughs, and worked ancient water-wheels over stagnant creeks in much the same fashion as their forbears had done thousands of years before.

There were the Bedouin encampments of ragged tents, the homes of restless nomads whose country was the length and breadth of Arabia. But the most significant encounter for us was with a detachment of the Foreign Legion. We overtook them as they marched along in the regulation column of threes. They were a soured, sullen, weary-looking lot, and had obviously been on the march for some considerable time. It gave me a queer sensation to see them bent almost double under the weight of their packs, accoutrements and armoury, each man carrying his own tent and sectional iron pole on his back. They looked like wild men to me. I had known this mad burlesque of soldiering, and I could not look upon it now without a creepy sensation trickling down the spine.

They were caked with dust and sweat. Naked and

raw heels leapt in and out of unlaced boots as they trudged through the dust—for legionnaires do not wear socks. (I used to make up for the comfort of stockings by wearing a thick layer of tallow in my boots!) What memories these dirty, unshaven, scowling faces evoked! What tell-tale eyes they seemed to have—eyes of whipped curs, brutal eyes, leering eyes, eyes glazed with pain.

Our fellows of the bus journey leaned out of the windows as we passed and threw out cigarettes, chocolates, fruit and bits of confectionery. The men broke ranks. They scrambled for the gifts like wild and hungry dogs—until a sharp, familiar yell came in French from an officer. I looked at Bain. He shook his head.

“Poor fellows,” he murmured. But he looked to me to be bursting with suppressed laughter.

We entered the City of the Seven Rivers by way of Maidan, through the “Gate of God,” a suburb of Damascus, passed a number of orange groves, and luxuriant gardens, a rippling stream, a cluster of buildings, and into the city itself, pulling up at one of the principal hotels, a cool, lofty edifice of stone, where we managed to secure a room for ourselves. (Even in the best hotel in Damascus it is not at all unusual for a man travelling alone to be put in a room with a perfect stranger.)

That evening we took our first thrilling stroll round the city. Damascus is the most incongruous of cities. The place is a forest of domes and minarets. There are beautiful gardens, many examples of architectural grandeur, lovely mosaics, picturesque costumes—and a perpetual stream of scowling Arabs, ferocious Jebel Druse, sullen Jews, distrustful, moon-faced Persians,

cowed-looking Senegalese troops, aggressive French *blues*, boorish legionnaires, wary Syrians, and even more wary negroes, ubiquitous Greeks, and all the nonchalant mixed races of the Levant. Mingling with them all were the swaggering, dapper French officers, resplendent with spit-and-polish and gold lace—of whom I'd better say no more, since I am prejudiced.

A beautiful Eastern city, perhaps the most beautiful, that seemed to be peopled with Eastern gangsters, schemers, warriors and thugs, going around their business as if they were plotting torture, murder and sudden death. I came back to it all with freshened eyes. It was as if I were being impressed by a people suffering some terrible injustice. The very atmosphere was aggressive.

But why should it be so? I had expected to find a city whose people had settled down peacefully. Only a few years before, the last time I had been in the place, the streets had run with blood. It had been the occasion of the historic Syrian revolt. There had been a Legion Cavalry charge, a welter of blood and death, a wild, insane gallop of dripping sabres until we reached the Citadel.

Being Arabian merchants of means, Bain and I picked up a one-horse gharry with a taxi hooter, and drove along the mile length of *Derb el-Mistakim*—the "Street Called Straight," with a Christian quarter at one end, a Hebrew quarter at the other, and Roman gates at both. We saw the Citadel, spilling troops, our old comrades, soldiers of a score of nationalities under one flag, the *Tricouleur* of France.

The bazaars of Damascus are different in that they are divided into industries. There is the silversmiths'

bazaar, where crude personal ornaments are made, the saddlers' quarter filled with scarlet saddles and horse-trappings gaily decorated with gold and silver threads, the shoemakers' booths in which grey old men sit sewing red and green and yellow slippers of gondola shape, and flamboyant, gorgeously-coloured top-boots.

In the Greek bazaar we were offered imitation "Damascus blades" and newly-fashioned "antiques." There is the book row, the cloth bazaar of crude handlooms, the silk bazaar—where men and boys sit working frames with their toes as dexterously as with their fingers.

A wonderful city! A city of colour and smouldering hate, fine buildings behind mud walls, barbaric grandeur, white marble, tessellated sidewalks, snowy fountains filled with the music of falling water, doves cooing from nests in the lime trees or perching in the trellised vines, the streets a surging sea of every race and no race at all.

We sought the shade of a native coffee-house, a low haunt in the stink quarter. Bain and I liked nothing better than to mix with these dirty children of the East. We then knew enough of the dialects to put in an occasional word and listen intelligently to the conversation of these simple but cunning folk.

And what extraordinary tales they tell each other! One could never reach the heart of them without adopting their glad rags, their manners, customs and speech. Dressed as we were, and with our experience, such jaunts were illuminating, to say the least. The tales of these wily children were largely of lusts, superstitions, the Faith, birth pangs and death.

They all have a horror of women who cannot conceive. Many of their tales, told with all the credulity of children, are based on such unlucky marriages. We listened while one told how his second wife was made to bear child. He told of a learned scholar who would visit her, take her to a room where they would be alone, and there write a charm on her abdomen. Thereafter a fine upstanding son. Another was filled with disgust because his young and beautiful one could never bear him a child without first visiting the presence of the newly dead.

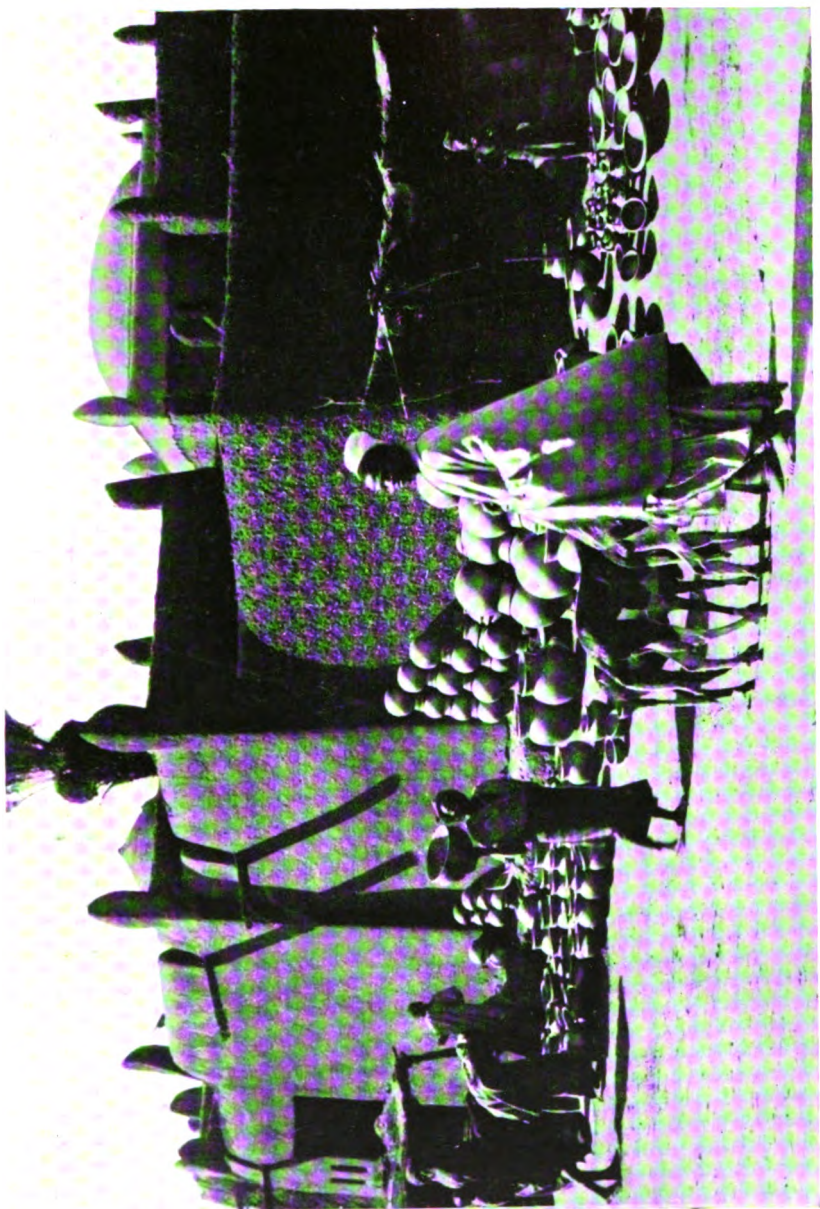
"Must have had a *penchant* for undertakers," quoth Bain, muttering in his beard.

After which, it was not surprising that we should seek out a café of a more lively and picturesque sort. This one was ablaze with lights, for darkness had fallen over the heaving city, and like the thoroughfares, it was peopled with a mixture of civilians, soldiers and savages. It had an arabesque ceiling set with Venetian mirrors. It differed from the streets in that the people here permitted themselves to relax. They were alive, animated, vivacious, men and girls larking and laughing, as if the seclusion of these garish walls freed them from that perpetual watch upon one's neighbour so characteristic of the streets.

We pushed our way through the gay spread of tables and found a vacant one—next to a bunch of legionnaires! A disturbing query lodged itself in my gills. But it was soon dispelled by friend Bain. He was determined not to take this jaunt seriously.

"The plot thickens, as the writing wallahs say!"

It was certainly interesting to listen to these legionnaires! We gathered they had been paid that day.



THE POTTER'S BAZAAR

[Photo : Associated Press

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They were out for a night's carousal. Their programme seemed to be wine, women and any other sort of sensation that happened to be around. They were, in fact, typical of their kind. When the dancing girls came near their table they threw out invitations. They were drinking *Ksara*, and so were we! Indeed, as the night advanced, we contrived to put quite a large quantity away. Perhaps we felt it was up to us to enter into the spirit of things. If those confounded legionnaires felt they were free for a spell from their irksome duties and filthy fatigues—how much more free should friend Bain and I feel?

"Drink as much as you can swill," I warned, "but leave the girls alone!"

The warning was necessary. Bain, increasing his cups, was apt to forget that he was an Arab of the Arabians. I had seen more than one nasty look passed by the carousing legionnaires. Not that either of us was afraid of a rough house. But, where we were concerned, there was far too much at stake. We had the laugh of these, and naturally we wanted to keep on laughing. . . . That night, watching these old comrades of ours snatching at a bit of happiness, our hard-won freedom was a sweet contemplation.

And then it came—that which we had every reason to avoid. Bain had saluted a little dancer. A legionnaire had jumped up, throwing a bottle and yelling—"Bloody Arab! Bloody Arab!"

I am not at all clear as to what followed, but I do know that neither of us was in a condition to accept such an insult! Those legionnaires had the shock of their lives when we began to use *fists*. They expected

knives from Arabs. What sort of Arabs were we, who could use our paws like trained boxers of the Western world? I fear we never stopped to think of such subtle differences.

It was the very father and mother of a scrap! Bain and I sailed in with great glee, knocking over tables and crashing up against these old comrades of ours. It was a real taste of the old days. The smell of these legionnaires was more than we could resist. In a few moments four legion wallahs and two Arabs were inextricably mixed up in as lovely a rough-and-tumble as one could hope for!

"Gosh! Ain't we got fun!" gasped Bain, grabbing a *kepi* and stowing it under his burnous.

Even in the midst of all the hubbub and excitement, he could still think of mementos! He was that sort of fellow. It was rare that he became thoroughly wound up. But when he did. . . . I knew only three or four occasions during the years I was adventuring with him. And, strangely enough, he hardly ever got into trouble without bringing out a memento! Take the episode concerning the Mickey Mouse ring, for example—which he still wore because it was so useful, as he said, on a bent knuckle! Just the same, that *kepi* memento very nearly wrote *memento mori* across our laughing freedom.

What would you? No self-respecting legionnaire would stand for such an appalling insult—that a lousy Arab should pinch his *kepi* and laugh! So, from then on, we got to work in real earnest. We had no option, as a matter of historical fact. Either we stood up to these inebriated legionnaires or they smashed our adjectival heads into small pieces.

By this time the whole place was in an uproar. Pretty girls of a variety of colour and nationality were still dancing—but now with squeals of excitement and on the fringe of the battle. Waiters were rushing around, dragging tables out of our reach. Customers, both gentle and savage, were yelling their encouragement. A perspiring proprietor was calling upon his Maker for assistance.

Then the night patrol rolled up. The corporal fired his gun in the air. There was a wild rush for the door. But four legionnaires and two Arabs, being so busy, failed to reach the door in time. We were ignominiously dragged through the streets to the Citadel.

"Yes," I said, choosing my idiom with care, "so what!"

"Now don't get sore, Digger. Just leave it all to papa. I guess I started something. Waal, I reckon I can get out of it, too."

"You'll have to be a magician. I can see a couple of white Arabs prepared for flogging in the morning, and when the Commandant sees our backs he'll guess again. Then there'll be a spot of identification. I've too good a recollection of a Corsican who was dragged back to the Legion ten years after he'd deserted. So what, Mr. Memento Bain?"

Bain began to laugh. I could not see the joke, and said as much.

"Say, listen! Didn't I tell you to leave it to me? I've got a scheme."

But there wasn't time for more. The corporal of the patrol was introducing us to the sergeant of the guard—in the way that Legion corporals do introduce Arabs of the lower classes to Legion sergeants. The

sergeant reached out a huge paw to grab friend Bain by the cloth of his *haik*. But Bain stepped back a pace, accidentally knocked over the corporal, and began to address the sergeant in plain, unvarnished American lingo.

"Now, listen, wise guy. Before you start getting fresh, let me inform you that I'm just a simple American subject, *comprenez*? Don't be too taken up with the sight of a bit of Arabian clobber. There's many an honest heart beats under an Arab *burnous*, *mallum*? If this weren't a kindness-to-animals week I'd peel your blinking, blankety rind, *n'est ce pas*? Say, listen, big fellah, you go catchem one *pukka* American Consul, *huh*? You bring American Consul, *si'l vous plaît*! We explain to American Consul little trouble in café, *comprende Vd*?"

Well, it is one way of rendering a Legion sergeant speechless, thought I. This one simply stood and gaped at Bain, with his mouth wide open and his eyes goggling. Perhaps it was a bit of a shock for the sergeant—to listen to an Arab with a drunken American accent gabbling queries about the American Consul and decorating his language with all manner of linguistic odds and ends. Most Legion sergeants are ignorant louts, and this fellow was no exception. He was certainly impressed by this drunken Arab who referred so familiarly to his friend, the American Consul.

The upshot of it all was that we were made comfortable until the American Consul could be found. It took a couple of hours, for he was out dining. By the time he had reached the Citadel we had sobered up.

The American Consul was a big, broad-shouldered fellow, with a clean-shaven, good-humoured face and

a glint of something like mischief behind his blue eyes. He stared hard at us for a few seconds. Then Bain began to explain. We were just a couple of tourists who had dressed up in this Arabian clothing for fun. We had been at the *Café de Paris* enjoying ourselves. Perhaps we had had a little too much liquor. Anyway, we did not start the trouble. Four legionnaires who had been brought into the *salle de police* along with us, had been seated at the table next to ours. There had been a lot of quite innocent fun with the dancing girls, and perhaps we had forgotten that we were dressed as Arabs and were being accepted as such. Just the same, one of the legionnaires had thrown a bottle and shouted "dirty Arabs!" Well, no self-respecting American citizen could stand for that. So we started something. We were just getting warmed up when the Legion night patrol happened along, and, well, here we are! This sergeant had perhaps some idea of turning us over to be flogged in the morning for daring to attack French legionnaires. . . .

The American Consul's grin grew broader and broader as Bain explained the situation. He turned to the sergeant and translated the story. The sergeant smiled, shook his head in admonition, fingering Bain's *abba* with obvious distaste.

"The sergeant is a Portuguese," explained the Consul. "He says that if you will go back to your hotel and promise to get out of those awful Arabian clothes he will forget all about it."

We gave the necessary promise, thanked the American Consul for getting us out of a very tight corner, and then made our way back to the hotel.

"Phew!" I gasped, when we were safely inside the hotel, "that was a close one, Bain!"

Bain grinned, showing white teeth in a forest of black beard.

"You're telling me!"

CHAPTER XXI

THE BECKONING HAND

A HAND sticking out of the sand. A live hand. It *was* a live hand, for it worked feebly, clawing at the air. The scouts had fired the signal. They had continued firing, which was unusual for them, an indication of their intense excitement. We went forward at the gallop and as we came up with the Wahabis they were dancing about, gesticulating frantically at the sand. Hurriedly we couched the beasts and leapt into the dust. Then we saw it—a live hand sticking through the surface of the golden dust, as if it were clawing its way upwards from the nether regions!

I am not given to quoting from diaries, but an excerpt from mine concerning this particular morning might not be out of place at this juncture:

“Several months of idleness, doing nothing more than the average village flatfoot—and then this, this live hand thrusting at our feet, coming up from the bowels of the earth, or so it seems. No wonder the scouts had signalled so frantically. I can only stand and gape. The others seem in much the same case. The Wahabis are terribly excited—and wary. No one moves for a full minute. No one speaks. It is ghastly. A bit of Arabian trickery, is what comes to my mind. Some mumbo-jumbo to give our Eastern members a nasty jolt. These Wahabis have always been a thorn in the Arabians’ side. The hand moves ever so feebly. This is a knock

for the superstitious. We stand in a circle—like a bunch of dumb yokels. There isn't a sign of anything else in this sea of sand—except the hand. The sun is still doing its damndest—127 in the shade. Been doing it for months. It's time the hot season was breaking. Crazy thoughts are careering across my mind. It seems ages that we stand and gape, like silly goofs, fascinated by this species of Arabian magic. It isn't above a minute or so actually. Then the Skipper drops into the dust and grabs at the hand. There is a scream. One of the Wahabis, I think. Only showing his anxiety for the Skipper, I fancy. Then Armstrong yells out: "It's warm! It is alive!"

Then half a dozen of us flopped down into the dust beside the Skipper and started to scrabble at the sand with our hands. Spades would have been dangerous, anyway. In a minute an arm was showing, the sleeve of a white drill coat. No Arab, this! We worked like madmen, clawing away the sand, exposing a shoulder, a head sunk forward on the chest, deeper and deeper, coming to the waist of him and the legs. As we loosened the sand about him, others took the shoulders, and at last we had drawn him up out of his grave and laid him flat on his stomach.

The Skipper hooked a finger into the fellow's mouth and nostrils and cleared out the clogging sand. Then he got astride him with his thumbs digging into the small of the back and began to work up and down in the familiar movements of artificial respiration. He kept it up for ten minutes, then turned the fellow over for a looksee. But he didn't show any signs of life. Back he went on his tummy. The Skipper kept it up for another fifteen minutes. Still no sign. Must

be finished, I thought. Then I took a turn, sweating over him for a while, working up and down, up and down, sweating and praying. After all, there was still life in the fellow when we came up with him. He couldn't be dead! He mustn't be dead! The strange thing is, I never despaired. I somehow knew the fellow was going to live.

And he did! I felt signs in him. We sat him up and persuaded a little brandy into him. Even then he was an age before he opened his eyes. We stripped him, chafed his limbs, massaged his heart, gave him sips of brandy. And he was delivered to us—out of the grave.

I looked at the cap in Bain's hand. It was skull-shaped and had thick ear-pieces.

"Good Lord!" I said. "Flying kit!"

"Sure! Dropped out of the skies and buried himself," grinned Bain.

The remark was what one might call "comic relief." I felt that way myself. I suspect most of us did. It was an enormous relief to see the fellow sitting up and taking notice. He stared round at us in a dazed fashion, spitting particles of sand in a mechanical sort of way.

"Feeling better?" asked the Skipper.

He nodded—and then:

"What's wrong?"

"We found you here. You seem to have had an accident. Can you remember anything about it?"

"Accident? Sure! I get you. Engine trouble. We came down. . . . What the hell is all this—Arabs talking English! Am I crazy?"

"Not a bit," laughed Armstrong. "We are a police patrol. We dress as Arabs when we're working in the desert."

But the airman wasn't listening. His face suddenly flushed with rage. He tottered drunkenly to his feet.

"You swine! What game is this? You dirty lot of louts! Decided not to bury me alive, eh?"

He stared around wildly.

"You half-smother me in the sand. . . . Damn you! Where's Kay? Where's my sister? What have you done with her? You bloody swine! Where is she? What've you done with the 'plane?"

His voice rose to a shriek. Bain took him by the arm.

"Say, listen, willya. I'm from the same middle-west as you. You've been in a tough spot. We got you out. The Skipper's explained that we're police. This is Captain Armstrong. We're the Fourteenth Irak Desert Patrol. Get me? We're here to help you. Tell us what happened."

The airman's face cleared. He grinned. He shook Bain by the hand.

"I should have taken you for an Arab anywhere! But there's no mistaking your voice. Gee! But it's good to hear that lingo!"

"I gather you were flying over here and had to come down?" prompted Armstrong.

"Yeah. I was flying with my sister . . . Kay. . . . My name's Studor, Erle Studor. We were making a record hop from Algiers to Baghdad. Then we had engine trouble. We came down in the desert. But, my God! Where is she? And where's the machine? I remember a party of Arabs coming up when we landed. They started to get funny. There was a woman in the party. . . ."

"A woman!"

"Sure! She seemed to be bossing the outfit . . . sort of queening it over a bunch of Arabs. She was dressed like a queen . . . an Egyptian queen. She wanted the machine! She talked a sort of Arabic French, demanding that Kay and I take her and a couple of her Arabs in the 'plane . . . somewhere over the hills. She'd show us where to land. Well, I was not standing for that! I told her I was going to Baghdad, and that as far as I was concerned, she could go to the other place. . . ."

"What happened then?"

"Oh, I took no further notice of the dame. I was bending over the works, trying to fix the engine, when I felt a sock on the back of my head. Funny thing is, I didn't go right out. I can remember sinking to my knees with my head in my hands, wondering what had happened. Thought at first it might be a sock from heat stroke. Had it like that once. I guess you fellows know all about that—you keep waking up out of funny dreams. I wasn't really out for the count. I don't know how long I remained like that . . . sort of semi-conscious, dreaming and waking. But I remember hearing the engine start up and I tried to get to my feet. Then somebody shoved me into the dirt again. I felt the weight of shifting sand. Some of it went into my eyes. . . ."

"I'll say it did! It was right over your head, old son, when we came along."

"I couldn't have been buried altogether, or I should have been dead by now."

"I think that what happened was you were shoved into a hole in the sand and some of it kicked over you to hold you down. They knew you were more or less

out and that the weight of the sand would finish you before you could recover sufficiently to throw it off."

Armstrong stared round at the great expanse of sanded waste. There wasn't a thing in sight anywhere, not a blade of grass, not a bush, not a stone. It was just shifting sand. He rapped out an order and a score of the Wahabis went off in various directions. If there were any tracks at all, they would find them.

"Yeah. I guess something like that happened. But what became of my sister and the 'plane? Where are those damned Arabs? Don't tell me they've taken the machine and my sister with them?"

"It looks as if they had made your sister get to work—at the point of the gun. She must have taken the woman up and her Arabs, perhaps a couple of them," opined the Skipper.

"Kay wouldn't do that!"

"Then, where is your machine?"

We stared around at the empty desert.

"Yeah. But she couldn't get very far. Certainly she couldn't take more than the woman and one Arab, not with all that petrol aboard. Why, she couldn't rise."

Armstrong shook his head. "You don't know the sort of persuasion these Arabs can inflict. Your sister has probably taken up the woman and one of the Arabs. The rest of the gang would make their own way to wherever the woman wanted to go."

"I guess your sister thought that the quickest way out. She had some idea of tricking these wallahs, I reckon. Mebbe she intended to fly the 'plane to the first sign of a town, fake engine trouble, and land.

That would give her a chance either to report what had happened to you or get the machine to herself under some pretext and race back to you. You must remember she had to do some swift thinking with that bunch of Arabs around her, and you, too, until they had that 'plane in the air. When you know Arabs. . . ."

I suggested we were wasting precious time.

"Can't do anything, Digger, until one of the boys has picked up the tracks," said Armstrong. "By the way, Studor, have you any idea as to the time all this happened?"

"About ten o'clock, I guess. It was short of that when we landed."

"Ten o'clock!" The Skipper stared at the steel-encased watch on his wrist. "It's still five minutes before eleven. All this must have happened in less than an hour. If we can pick up the sand-tracks of the gang, we shall not be long in discovering what has happened to your sister and the 'plane."

There were all manner of tracks in those shifting sands, however. What we required were the impressions of a band moving in more or less regular order. Finally, one of the boys signalled. In a few seconds we had mounted and were loping steadily in the wake of our scouts, proceeding in a northerly direction. The band had apparently returned to their stronghold somewhere in the hills.

What had happened to this girl, Kay Studor? That was the query which worried not only her brother but all of us. Had she tried out some scheme with the 'plane? What chance had she, once she was in the skies, with perchance a couple of knives or guns sticking in her back as she piloted the machine?

"No reason given, I suppose, for wanting to use you and the 'plane?" asked Armstrong.

"No. And I didn't ask for any. The demand struck me as being such a damned piece of impertinence that I treated it accordingly. 'Fraid I might have adopted more subtle tactics—though it's easy enough to be wise after the event. I have wondered since why the woman should want to use the 'plane. After all, if the idea was for Kay and I to fly her back to her home . . .?"

"Quite. You would then know where these bandits hang out! And the woman would not be content to show you that and then say good-bye to you and the 'plane. Oh, dear, no! There's only one conclusion. The idea was to secure you and your sister as well as the machine for her own use. I imagine a 'plane and two pilots would be very useful to the woman chief of this marauding band!"

"Supposing she could get the two pilots to obey her orders!" snorted Studor.

"She seems to have had some idea of that sort—either that or finding out how to manipulate and control the machine, for her own use. Having achieved that, she would have got rid of you and your sister."

"Maybe what you say is right, Armstrong, and I've heard of some queer folk in these desert regions, but it's the first time I've run up against an Arab woman who showed such an extraordinary interest in flying."

"The conclusion I came to long ago," smiled Armstrong, "is that the woman is not an Arab at all. It would, in the first place, be something unique to find an Arab woman in charge of a gang of Arab or Kurd outlaws. Secondly, even the more advanced of

the Arab women of the towns have not yet become air-minded!"

"Then who the devil is this mystery woman?"

"Couldn't say for certain. I can only guess from what you have told me. You saw her. Was she very dark? Did she have very striking eyes and a Jewish cast of features?"

I experienced a queer, creepy sensation as the Skipper asked these questions. Bain gave me a peculiar look—and I knew what that meant! Studor, however, did not seem to have taken special notice of the mystery woman. He remembered only that she was veiled over mouth and nose and that her eyes were very dark. He had been paying too much attention to the machine to bother with the woman.

"If my surmise is correct," pursued Armstrong, "this mystery woman is one for whom we've been searching for years. I'd very much like to get my hands on her. She's the most elusive devil in the whole of Arabia."

By this time we were beginning to climb, pursuing a track over broken country, then along a winding road which began to mount steeply. The Skipper and I rode at the head of the column, in the wake of the scouts, with Bain and Studor immediately behind us. There was something damnably familiar about this road. I knew well enough where it would lead us, and I was not exactly enjoying the quest. . . .

It was mid-afternoon and so far we had not come within sight of the gang we were chasing. Doubtless they were well mounted on good black barbs, but if the Skipper's surmise about the mystery woman, as he called her, were correct, the capture of her and her

band was inevitable, since we knew precisely where they made their headquarters.

It was a long time since I had trodden this road, but my memory of it was so green that it might have been only yesterday. When we came in sight of a great overhanging ledge of rock I could hardly refrain from shuddering at the recollection. We were climbing now in Indian file. There was no further need to bother about whether we were trailing a gang of outlaws. Every man in the patrol knew where the track was leading us. And every man knew of my particular experience in these regions!

"This is where you took your vacation, Digger, ain't it?" laughed Bain.

As it affects my reputation for discretion and choice of language, I refrain from recording my reply.

Now we were almost under that damnable ledge, that shelf of rock on which I had been marooned for days after making my getaway from the stronghold of the woman I shall never cease to admire and hate—Olga Radnowitz. Three times I had made contact with this mystery woman, and after each occasion she had contrived to disappear into the blue. I stared at the chunk of rock from which I had made so many attempts to escape on that memorable occasion, and I wondered greatly what was to happen *this time*!

We couched our camels and pitched camp under the great shelving rock. The plan was to leave the beasts encamped here while we made our way up the hillside on foot. We left only the *oont-wallahs* and a skeleton guard behind. It was late afternoon when we started to climb, like so many flies, up the tortuous path.

"Ready for some fun, Studor?" grinned Bain.

"You bet I am!"

We climbed steadily for an hour. The camels could have made it, but there was the fall of water above which we must penetrate and a forest of vegetation beyond. It was not worth risking such valuable beasts. We ought to reach the plateau before sundown.

"Where does this dame and her minions live?" queried Studor, breathlessly, "on the roof?"

We came at last to the fall of water and the Skipper called a halt. The situation was explained to Studor. The rest of us knew it well enough!

"I dare say you know your history," smiled Armstrong, "and you can recall that at the time of the Crusaders there were bands of brigands very active in that part who called themselves the Assassins. It was a good name for them, for that is what they were. There have been evidences of the revival of this secret sect, even in recent times. But that's by the way. You'll have a chance in a few minutes of looking upon one of their secret retreats, a place used by them six centuries ago. As Bain told you, we've visited it before. We must first penetrate that fall of water over there. But don't worry about that. It's quite a thin sheet of water and you'll get no more than a slight ducking when you dash through it. That is the secret of the retreat. On the other side is the stream. We shall follow it through a wood—until we come to a plateau where the mystery woman, Olga Radnowitz, sometimes makes her home. Are you ready?"

"Sure! It sounds like an Arabian Night's dream to me, but I'll take your word for it!"

"Right! Come on! Let's go!"

We played follow-my-leader through the sheet of water and emerged on to the clearing at the other side, then made our way silently through the forest. As we reached the high ground we went forward on hands and knees, like so many weird animals creeping through the wild undergrowth, until we reached the fringe of the forest.

Studor gasped when he saw the green expanse of velvet sward, the riot of colour beyond, the world of blossoming flowers, the high walls of valleys and hills, the slopes and cliffs spread with fir, spruce, giant rhododendrons, the red, yellow and blue of the poppies—and behind this rising garden the white towers and roof-tops of the castle set against a forest of black cypress trees.

“Gee! What a picture! And look! There’s my ‘plane! Say! Armstrong! What now?”

“We’ll surround the place. I must place my men. We can’t take any chances now. The light will be gone in an hour. Hang on now while I fix things.”

CHAPTER XXII

OUT OF COMMISSION

THAT astounding picture will remain in my mind for all time. That riot of colour and vegetation, situated as it was among the mountain peaks, and bathed in the gold of the dying sun, held one spellbound for long moments. Even Studor, with all his anxiety for a brave sister, could not but admire the breath-taking beauty of the scene. But I shall remember it, too, because it marked the end of a phase, the close of a stage in life for me.

As we lay awaiting the signal to advance, staring through the fringe of foliage at the lovely pleasance, the woman who seemed so essentially a part of the scene, Olga Radnowitz, came into view across the greensward. She was attended by four muscular and swarthy natives. She strolled over towards the 'plane—an arresting creature in just that setting. She had discarded the veil. The luxuriant black hair was uncovered, save for some barbaric jewel that was clasped about it and around her forehead. She turned in our direction as she paused to gaze at the blood-red afterglow. The face, at once handsome and tragic, and those great magnetic eyes that could laugh and dance, were curiously lit by the glow, so that she presented the picture of a statue in burnished bronze, a picture that took one's breath away. In that black robe, moulded about her, clinging as if it were damp, emphasising the majesty

of her, she was a queen of the ages, rendering glittering homage to the sun.

The 'plane appeared to fascinate her. She walked around it, touching it, examining the various gadgets. What we had suspected was true. She wanted that machine, as a spoiled child wants a toy; and, as I well knew, she was ever one to fight for that which she desired. Clearly, the giant bird would be of the greatest service to her, since she had apparently made her home again in this pleasance of the hill-tops. It occurred to me that, with all her resources for making wealth, she could very well purchase a 'plane; but that was hardly her way. She may wish to be queen of the skies, in more than one sense, but she would never condescend to the mechanics of piloting an aeroplane; and since there were none among her Kurdish henchmen with any knowledge of mechanics—she had taken the heaven-sent opportunity presented to her in the heart of the desert, which gave her 'plane and pilot as well!

"She's certainly a good-looker!" chuckled Bain.

At that moment she started to climb into the cockpit, not without displaying a generous length of silk-veiled limb, and seemed to find much to amuse her in the pretty instruments on the dashboard.

"If the dame doesn't watch out, she'll ruin my 'plane," snapped Studor. "God! How much longer are we to wait? What has the bitch done with Kay?"

"She'll be all right, old son," assured Bain. "She's too useful to the woman for any harm to come to her."

For my part, I had a fairly shrewd idea as to what had happened, having been in much the same predicament. Kay Studor was probably tied up in some room of the castle and was likely to remain there until she

consented to join Madame Radnowitz in the service of a pilot—or until she was rescued. Olga had failed before. She would most certainly fail on this occasion.

And yet, I could not help admiring that dark beauty with the classic Hebrew cast of features. For sheer audacity, she'd take a lot of beating. There was something quite superb about her outlook on life. She really believed herself a queen. Perhaps she was—a re-incarnation of Cleopatra, for she had the same poise, the same natural hauteur, the same majesty of bearing, an even greater beauty.

Civilisation is but skin-deep. Off the leash, man is very much an animal. I must confess that, as I lay there watching the statuesque beauty playing about with that machine, I could not avoid some contemplation, some anticipation of the joys of having Olga Radnowitz as a prisoner. Something barbaric in me thrilled at the prospect. I fervently hoped I might be her jailer, so that I could bring the proud beauty to her knees. Was it not human to hope for this turning of the tables? Here, for me, was a capture and a release. For I thought then that it was only because she was at large that my mind had constantly been troubled by thoughts of her. Once she was a captive, my mind would find peace. I would cease to be worried with this ravishing beauty who seemed to have the power to steal out of the night of time into my dreams. . . .

That was how I fooled myself as I lay there on the evening of that momentous day. What would you? Life is full of illusions. In all my experiences of womankind, not inconsiderable, there had been nothing like Olga Radnowitz. No amount of experience could rid some men of a hyper-sensitive spirit. Perhaps it is

that a white man must grow a little mad after too long a spell in Arabia, after too much activity under a sun that over-ripens men's thoughts.

Maybe there was a change indicated for me. I had overstayed my welcome in this crazy land of sand and sun. Well, I decided, once the capture of this she-devil was complete, I would think about it. There was nothing I wanted so much just then as to cross swords with this siren of the peaks, to see her squirm at the point of the knife—as she had made me squirm; to laugh at the knowledge of her soft white flesh, as she had laughed at the sight of my uncovered chest, the pale skin in striking contrast to my sun-tanned and bearded face.

Mad thoughts of a mad brain. I can recall taking myself firmly in hand, a little afraid that these meanderings of the mind had nothing to do with that proud beauty, but were merely the effects of the sand beetle's gnawing. . . .

Armstrong dropped down beside us, crashing into my disordered thoughts. He brought reality, a sense of proportion. Just then, he seemed coldly sane to me. But he always was cold. His mental apparatus was ice-chilled. No amount of heat and sand would ever get him. I never knew a being so level, so entirely devoid of what one is pleased to term natural emotion. If he ever felt anything, it was never permitted to penetrate that granite jowl.

"Listen, you fellows," he whispered. "I've put the boys out in extended order. They know exactly what to do when we advance and close in. As soon as they see me step out of the trees and on to the green patch, every man will follow. We'll cross at the double. As

long as we can we must avoid any gun-play. I am not thinking of the woman or her gang. I'm thinking of the 'plane and the petrol stowed in her. We must not attract any gunfire near her. And, anyway, I imagine we should well outnumber this mob. We'll be at close quarters with them, so they're more likely to use knives than guns. Well, now. Let's go!"

The Skipper left the shelter of the trees and stepped on to the sward. In a second a whole line of men had followed him and were running across the soft turf towards the castle.

I have no very clear recollection of just what happened after that. My eyes were on Olga. She had been sitting in the cockpit when we appeared. She had stared with amazed eyes at the line of advancing men. Then she leapt from the 'plane and ran towards the castle, her clinging draperies lifted, lovely even then, in that lithe, sinuous way she had of moving her flexible limbs. And though I tore after her—something akin to pity swept me so that I shook myself angrily. She was calling to her men as she ran, rallying them with commands in a voice that rang clear as a bell above the thudding of men's feet.

I must have lost my reason at the sound of that unforgettable voice. I got the crazy idea that she was fleeing from me, that she would again elude our grasp. I flew after her, knocking over yelling and cursing men, dodging knife-thrusts, swinging my Mauser-butt, racing after that fleeing, silk-draped figure like one demented. A bunch of Kurds came out of the building as I drew near. I was hardly a yard from her then. She turned to stare at me, then directed the men. They raced past me. I saw her make for the building. I followed.

The place was dim and shadowy after the gold glow without. I hesitated for a moment, getting my bearings. I was in a large room that appeared to be filled with ornamental archways, rich carpets, cold stone and little else. Then I saw her. She stood with her back against a stone block that supported one of the archways, hands behind her, ample bosom heaving after her sudden exertion. There was a smile on her lips, and that in her eyes which made her seem something more than human, something at once alluring and terrifying. She laughed—that rich, carolling laugh of hers.

“We meet again, Monsieur Digger,” she intoned sweetly. “But how charming you look! Your strong face is so full of purpose. It is so dark and brown—not like your white body. And your eyes! They are beautiful! There is a light in them, like the eyes of a tiger when it is very savage. That is how I like you! Now you are a man, yes?”

I strode over to her, feeling all sorts of a fool.

“You’re under arrest, Olga Radnowitz.”

She laughed. “But again! You have arrested me before. Why did you not take me? Do you think you will take me now?”

“You won’t get away this time,” I said grimly, “so you may as well throw this game in and stop fooling.”

I might have saved my breath. She was tickled to death with the idea of being under arrest. She occupied the next few minutes in giving me the bells of her laughter, rich pealing laughter that carolled its way up and down the scale. I can hear it now!

Then she subsided. She pouted like a spoiled child.

"Is it that you do not love me any more, Monsieur Digger?"

"This is hardly a time for sentiment. Will you stop fooling and come along quietly?"

"You know, Monsieur Digger, that I would go anywhere with you—almost! Why do you not come with me? Life could be very wonderful for us. No other woman could make you happy like I could. You know that. You are just being stupid. You are like the peacock, full of pride because you are a policeman of the patrols. That is not happiness. You know that I could give you greater happiness than that. Will you not come? Let us go—while those fools fight among themselves. . . ."

With an angry snort I reached out for her arm, but just in time I saw her hand flash to the back of her neck. I ducked. The knife went hurtling through the air, clattering harmlessly on the stone floor. I clutched at her clumsily. She wriggled, slippery as an eel, and eluded my grasp. Thereafter a mad game of hide-and-seek in and out of those archways, with the woman chuckling and laughing as she slipped and dodged, this way and that, for all the world as though we were a couple of kids at play.

I cursed and sweated in that darkening room. Soon we were stumbling about in the dimness. I knew nothing of what was happening outside. Nor did I care. I only wanted this woman. I had gone quite berserk. There were moments even when I did not know why I wanted her, when I forgot that she was wanted by the police and that I was a policeman. Sometimes we were just man and woman, I, the man, chasing the woman, in a game as old as creation.

If the gathering darkness made it difficult for me, it was also difficult for her. I have wondered many times since why she did not run from that room under cover of the darkness, to some other part of the building of which I knew nothing, and so give herself the chance to make a getaway. But she did not. She continued to spin round and round those stone arches, breathlessly, only the swish of her draperies betraying the presence of the figure that grew more and more shadowy.

And then, more by accident than design, I tripped her. She went down. I fell upon her savagely, was astounded to realise that her arms were closing in a vice-like grip about my neck, that she was pressing me close with an amazing strength. I knew the warm folds of her. That familiar scent filled my nostrils, sickening the senses. I wanted to give up the crazy struggle. Her soft breath was fanning my cheek. Her murmuring voice was in my ears. But even as she murmured, my hands were thrusting upwards towards the firm column of the throat. . . .

"Foolish man! Foolish man! Why will you not take what life offers you. . . ."

The warm flesh was under my hands. It was with a supreme effort that I repressed a desire to choke the life out of her. She screamed then. Her hands fell away from me. I had a vague idea that one of her hands was scraping about the stone floor. Suddenly she lunged. I felt the hot, stinging slash at my shoulder, knew that her lips were pressing on mine, even as she pressed the blade home. I remembered no more. The world was blotted out. . . .

There followed days and nights of distorted dreams, a period of confused and bewildering nightmares when

sleep was indistinguishable from the torturing pictures of semi-consciousness. I committed murder a thousand times during that long period of sickness. Always it was the same victim—Olga Radnowitz. Always the method was the same—strangulation . . . the feel of soft but firm flesh under my clutching hands.

I can remember periods of consciousness, periods of neither waking nor dreaming but a vague intermingling of the two, not knowing whether I were experiencing the insane dreams of fitful sleep or the tortured thoughts of awakened reality. It seemed to my befuddled brain that many days passed in this mad fashion, and then many more while I felt the familiar swaying motion of camels.

In the hospital at Ramadi I came to full consciousness. It was there where I learned—oh, balm for tortured spirit!—that I had not killed Olga Radnowitz, that she had, in fact, escaped once more. I heaved a sigh of relief—relief at my own escape. Though I have killed men in my time, quite a number, I am not conscious of ever having killed a woman, even in the accident of battle. . . . And this woman!

But I am convinced that Olga was under the impression that I intended to strangle her. Hence her peculiar behaviour with the knife and her lips. She was, she thought, facing certain death. Then I should die with her.

After I learned what had happened my recovery was rapid enough. The frightful dreams ceased. I found peace. In a few weeks I was out of hospital and journeying with Armstrong and Bain to Baghdad. There I boarded a steamboat for the five hundred miles trip down the Tigris to Basrah, where I was to take the

liner for India and a few months' recuperation in the cool, health-giving climate of the hills.

As the boat was moving away from the old city walls of Baghdad, I leaned on the rail and waved good-bye to those two great pals, Armstrong and Bain. Suddenly Bain's hand swung into the air. Something fell on the deck at my feet. I stooped and picked up a tiny parcel. As I tore away the wrappings, Bain's voice reached me across the widening strip of muddy river:

"Something for your diary, Digger!"

It was a ring, a ring of memories, with a quaint little figure in black and white enamel and two tiny rubies for eyes. The Mickey Mouse ring for which friend Bain had worked and sweated and fought one memorable sunny afternoon!

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